水城正太郎　みずきしょうたろう

『東京タブロイド』シリーズ（富士見ミステリー文庫）、『せんすいかん』シリーズ（ＨＪ文庫）。『ホビー・データ』を経て、現在ライター集団『Ａ－ＴＥＡＭ』主催。この間、ボードゲームやってたんですが、ルールが把握出来ずに、何故だろう何故だろうと思っていたら、どうやらルールそのものが妙だったようです。というかゲームの目的が「スペイン全土に影響力を持つこと」になってる。壮大すぎてわからん。

伊藤宗一　いとうそういち

兵庫県在住のイラストレーター兼漫画家。
一般向けから成年向けまで幅広く活動中。
好物は、熱血・筋肉・萌え・エロ・爺。
<一言>
前回よりもさらに全力ではっちゃけた挿絵になりました、喜んで頂けると嬉しいです。派手なのは楽しいです。もっと描かせてください(笑)

カバーイラスト／伊藤宗一　装丁／西村 大

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水城正太郎　いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT2

ＨＪ文庫
HOBBY JAPAN

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水城正太郎　作品

せんすいかん　その1
せんすいかん　その2
せんすいかん　その3
せんすいかん　まとめ
いちばんうしろの大魔王
いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT2

魔法の授業で力を制御できず、またもや絢子の服を吹き飛ばしてしまった阿九斗。美津子先生の勧めに従い精神を鍛えなおすための修行場に赴いた阿九斗だが、そこで偶然に宝の地図を発見する。生徒会長と相談して地図のことは秘密にしようと決めたが、いつの間にか地図が流出。宝を探し出そうとする生徒たちが次々と現れ、学園は一大騒動に……。

HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT2

学園の秘密に挑む阿九斗の前に
立ちはだかるのは……!?
「だけど、ボクは自分の信じることのために
キミを通すわけにはいかない」
「それなら……」

「傍から見たら
完全な悪役だと
思うんだよね」

登場人物紹介

紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）

真面目で善良なはずなのに将来「魔王」になると予言されてしまった主人公。

曽我けーな（そが）

落ちこぼれな天然少女。勘違いから阿九斗に懐いてしまう。

ころね

政府から派遣された人造人間。阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう。

服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）

一途で純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗のことが気になっているが、常にすれ違ってしまう。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）

学園を裏から操る黒魔術師。阿九斗の力を手に入れようと画策するが……。

Prologue

Her earliest memories were filled with her older brother.

Due to their large age gap, her brother had doted on her. He had done everything she wanted. He had gone along with her self-indulgences as much as he was able and had put his little sister ahead of himself.

Naturally, that alone would not be enough for her memories of her brother to be so strong.

He had died just when she reached the age when she became more aware of the world around her.

She had constantly wanted to remember her brother, so she had started to associate her brother with any enjoyable memory of the past. Eventually, she began fabricating convenient memories for this purpose. She began to confuse the brother in her memories with her image of the ideal male, so she created a strong, stylish, and kind mental image of her brother.

Everyone fabricates memories in this way, but they cause no problems because they rarely come to the surface. However, she saw her lies fall apart in a rather intense fashion. And it happened when she was a sensitive young girl.

She belonged to a well-known old family. She was to attend the prestigious Constant Magic Academy and learn the truth regarding her brother according to the "family custom".

"Fujiko, you must become the head of the Etou family. You must take the place of that pathetic brother of yours who failed and lost his life!"

Etou Fujiko felt something was horribly off about her mother's cold words.

—But wasn't my brother our family's treasure? Didn't he have excellent grades but died in an unfortunate accident? Didn't mother never mention him because it was too sad?

She had several questions, but instead of answering them, her mother had silently grabbed her hand and taken her to the mansion's basement. She had always been told never to enter the basement. She had tried to go there out of curiosity a few times in the past, but it had always been locked.

Her mother had pulled out an old key and opened the basement door. Cold air had escaped, but the basement had not been even slightly dusty. It had obviously been frequently used surprisingly recently.

What she had seen there had been a cruel sight for a girl who was soon to enter middle school.

Her brother's corpse had been sealed in a glass case. Unlike the brother in her memories, he had looked thin and unreliable. This was partially due to how much Fujiko had grown since her brother's death, but it had more to do with how much she had idealized her image of him. She had not felt fear, but a corpse was still a corpse. He had appeared to be only sleeping, but the look on his face had clearly not been that of a living human. Fujiko had been unable to approach him. Simply put, she had been at a sensitive and cleanliness-obsessed age, so she had found the corpse to be "filthy".

"You must not tell anyone what I tell you here. You must never tell anyone," said Fujiko's mother after circling around behind her.

Fujiko had turned around and looked up at her mother. She had seen an expression that was not quite anger and not quite sorrow. She had never seen this expression before. Her mother had held an orb made of light magic in her left hand and it had cast deep shadows across her face. Fujiko's face had twisted in fear and her mother had violently tightened the right hand holding Fujiko's shoulder.

"You must not cry! You must look at him!"

Fujiko had begun trembling without saying a word. Her mother's grip on her shoulder had loosened, but her mother had continued speaking with the same look on her face.

"Each generation of the Etou family holds a position as a Muleet surveyor. Being a surveyor is an important job for a follower of the god Muleet. A surveyor is an adventurer who travels to many different places and provides our god with a report on the situation there. And yet he…"

Her mother had turned the magic light orb out toward the glass coffin. Fujiko's young heart had felt it was cruel to refer to her brother as "he" rather than by name.

"When excavating some ruins in the academy, he saw something there. It scared him so badly that he abandoned his job and fled! I do not know what it is he found. However, it was likely nothing more than an average

monster or some illusion triggered by a trap… Pathetic. He was truly pathetic. He ultimately failed to excavate the ruins. He was forced to take responsibility and had necromancy cast on him during an official trial. That is normally only done to have a criminal confess about his past! We were fortunately spared having to go to the trial…but it seems he truly did only see an illusion caused by a trap. He had always been a timid boy. He would always play with you and your dolls. …Your entry into the academy is the final judgment. That will also be when we can finally stop storing his body in our basement."

Her mother's words had ended there. Fujiko had looked up to find tears running down her mother's face. Fujiko had been unable to comprehend the complicated emotions of an adult. Fujiko's heart had been filled within nothing but fear, cruelty, and irrationality.

—My brother was pathetic, but kind. He was a sad excuse of a man, but he died due to his weakness. This school must be a scary place, but this is what happens if I lose. If I am weak, something horrible will happen to me. There is something wrong with a god that allows such horrible things to happen. My brother was kind…no, pathetic, but no matter how pathetic and weak he may have been, that is no reason for him to die. Even the gods betray us. If I am weak, mother will treat me the same way… I must be strong. I must be strong…even if I am a girl.

From then on, Fujiko had always held those chaotic feelings deep in her heart.

Once she had entered the magic academy, she had never shown her true feelings to anyone. She had acted modest and graceful (because her high-class upbringing had told her that was how a "strong" woman acted), but had secretly been zealous in her studies of both normal magic and black magic. By teaching herself necromancy and stealing a portion of her brother's corpse, she had successfully resurrected his head. That had taught her anew that what her mother had told her was true, but this no longer discouraged her. In time, Fujiko grew to be the school's madonna and the strongest member of its delinquents. If nothing out of the ordinary had happened, she may have influenced history as both a surveyor and a spy for the black magicians.

However, her destiny greatly changed when that demon king arrived at the school.

Chapter 1: Do You Like Solitary Confinement?

Part 1

Sai Akuto was having trouble with the hands-on training for beginner magic. Students formed pairs in the schoolyard and played catch with balls formed from mana, the foundation of all types of magical power. However, it was not what he had to do that was causing Akuto trouble. He was standing alone in the schoolyard and no one would approach him.

—I guess my bad reputation isn't going to disappear overnight.

Akuto was unsure what expression to take at a time like this and ended up with one of bitter disgust. He was very attractive, but he had a natural mean look in his eyes that gave him a villainous look. His expression was making it harder for anyone to approach him than just his reputation, but he did not realize it.

—It's been like this ever since it was predicted I would become the demon king. Honestly, is there no upside to this at all?

His bad luck had started when a prediction said to have 100% accuracy had said he would become the demon king in the future. From that moment on, every student in the school had hated and feared him at first sight and made all sorts of misunderstandings about him. He was even under observation by the government. Naturally, he was not living a normal school life.

Even so, Akuto did have a friend: Miwa Hiroshi. He was a boy with a mischievous look about him and he praised Akuto as his "aniki" despite them being the same age. However, today Hiroshi had said "Aniki, I am nowhere near worthy of being your partner…" before running off.

—What do you mean "nowhere near worthy"? Still, I can't rely on Hiroshi for everything. Maybe I can find a replacement partner.

With that optimistic thought, Akuto began looking around. All of his classmates lined up in the schoolyard looked away when he turned in their direction. However, he spotted two people discussing something out of the corner of his eye. It was the class rep, Hattori Junko, and their homeroom teacher, Torii Mitsuko. They were both quite energetic – or rather, were not holding back – so Akuto could hear their conversation from a good distance away.

"Sai Akuto-kun needs to learn how to control his magic, so will you help him?" asked Mitsuko-sensei.

She was tall, had unruly hair, and wore round glasses. She was obviously a sociable woman.

"No, I will not," flatly refused Junko.

She had a cool and noble beauty, but she often had a sharp look in her eyes and could be quite stubborn.

"But I can't ask anyone else. You're the class rep, remember? You're also powerful in your own right."

Mitsuko-sensei did not back down, but Junko was not about to give up either.

"Even my strength has its limits. Who would choose to be his magic training partner?"

"But it's his first time and this is something he has to experience eventually. Don't you think it would be nice if you were his first?" said Mitsuko-sensei teasingly.

Junko's face grew red.

"Have you no shame, sensei!? Why are you saying something so indecent!?"

"C'mon, I was talking about today's lesson. What did you believe I meant?"

"I know what you were talking about. Just please stop joking around…"

Junko quickly lowered her voice to a whisper and glanced over toward Akuto. He waved back at her and she suddenly grew angry.

"Do not eavesdrop on us, Sai Akuto!"

—But you were talking loud enough for everyone to hear…

Akuto kept that thought to himself and slowly lowered his hand.

Junko walked over to him with long strides.

Akuto prepared himself for an angry complaint, but Junko pointed straight at his face and shouted, "If you heard us, then what are you standing around for!? Hurry up and get ready!"

"Eh?"

"I said get ready!"

As Junko spoke while looking around at the other students, Akuto finally caught on.

"Th-thank you."

Akuto was so thankful he grabbed Junko's hands. This was the pathetic sight of the friendless boy being overly excited about a girl showing him a bit of kindness, but Akuto was so tall that the other students could only think he was seducing her.

The students watching on whispered among themselves.

"The demon king's at it again…"

"I guess the class rep really has fallen completely under his control."

Junko must have heard them because she blushed and jerked her hands out of Akuto's grasp.

"I said go get ready!"

"Okay. And sorry. That isn't what I meant to happen."

Akuto had also heard the voices of the other students, so he backed away in preparation for their magic training.

"Hey, wait," called out Junko.

"What is it?"

"I need to warn you, so listen up. This lesson is meant to teach gentle control over mana by throwing a mana ball back and forth. This is truly the most basic of lessons and the rest of us mastered it in middle school. However, it can still be dangerous if you do not take it seriously or you stop focusing. And the danger falls on your partner rather than yourself. I hope you understand that."

Akuto nodded in response to Junko's warning.

"Understood. I would never hurt you," he replied with a serious expression.

Junko's blushed once more.

"I thought I told you to stop saying such conceited things!"

—I was only saying what I honestly felt…

Akuto silently complained and moved away from Junko. He turned to face her at a distance of about a dozen meters.

"Here I go," said Junko as she raised her right hand.

A ball-sized orb of light appeared in her hand.

Magic worked by controlling the mana that filled the air. A generator facility in the center of the imperial capital sent energy into the earth itself. That energy was made to resonate with the mana, so mana and energy were often thought of as the same thing. The mana would then accumulate in the bodies of living things and energy could be drawn out from there. Different people held different amounts of mana and it was easier to affect the mana in the atmosphere with more mana inside one's body. The human will was transformed into electricity in the brain, that electricity controlled the mana in the body, and that resonated with the external mana. That meant one's natural level of internal mana and one's ability to focus were what mattered most when using magic. This lesson was meant to train the students' ability to focus.

"Catch it."

Junko lightly moved her right wrist. The mana ball flew in a gentle parabola toward Akuto.

He raised his right hand. Junko must have mastered this level of control because he did not even need to adjust his hand. The mana ball landed softly in his palm.

"Imagine lightly tossing a ball. Now throw it back. Remember, nice and slow."

Junko held out her right hand in order to catch the ball.

"So I just have to do what you did?" asked Akuto and Junko nodded. "Okay then."

Akuto lightly swung his right hand.

—Just a slight flick of the wrist…

As previously stated, the more mana someone was born with, the more of an effect they had on the mana in the atmosphere.

And that meant…

With a tremendous bang, the mana ball sliced through the air. It almost looked like he had fired a rifle at Junko.

"Ee!"

Junko let out a shriek, but she was known as the strongest in their year. She held her hands out in an attempt to stop the speeding mana ball. However, it was moving so quickly it would likely break her arms and then send her flying backwards.

—Not good!

Akuto knew he had to do something before the mana ball smashed into Junko.

And his thoughts were immediately transferred to the mana ball.

The mana ball exploded in every direction just as Junko tried to catch it.

A great flash of light enveloped Junko before growing into a perfect mushroom cloud in the middle of the schoolyard.

Their classmates began muttering among themselves once more.

Once the smoke cleared, a small crater could be seen.

Junko was sitting on the ground in the center of it.

"Wha-…? Wha-…?"

Junko's eyes were opened wide with anger and shock. She seemed unharmed. That had to be a side effect of Akuto's strong desire to not harm her.

"This is why I didn't want to do this! You have no idea how to hold back!"

Junko stood up and pointed accusingly at Akuto.

And then she froze in place.

Every inch of Junko's skin grew red when she saw herself.

Her uniform had fallen off of her in pieces.

"Hy-hyaaah!"

Junko was completely nude, so she wrapped her arms around herself and crouched down.

The boys in the class gave their comments:

"Ohh!!"

"Look at that!"

And then the girls gave entirely different comments:

"The poor thing!"

"Boys are so horrible."

Akuto ran over to Junko saying, "I-I'm sorry."

"Idiot! You idiot! Stay back!"

Junko violently shook her head.

"But I can't just leave you like this…"

Akuto removed his uniform's vest and placed it on her back. It was large enough to cover her entire body.

Junko looked up at him in surprise.

"Th-thanks…" she said doubtfully. But once she held the vest closed in front and stood up, her expression stiffened and she glared at Akuto. "No, wait. Why am I thanking you after what happened!?"

"You have a point. This was my fault."

Akuto honestly bowed his head. Whether she was frustrated or embarrassed, Junko clenched her teeth and blushed even more.

"Why are you apologizing so readily!?"

Junko could not take her hands off of the vest or it would open up, so she started kicking Akuto instead of punching him.

"Because I really am sorry. This only happened because of my lack of control."

Akuto hung his head down and let Junko kick him.

After about six kicks, Junko grew even angrier that he was not resisting.

"Why are you letting me kick you!?"

"How many times do I have to say it? This was my fault. Also…"

Akuto pointed at Junko. Whenever she kicked up at Akuto, the bottom of the vest she was wearing would flip up and expose her attractive legs.

"If I moved out of the way, everyone would be able to see your legs," said Akuto while keeping his voice as kind as possible.

For a few seconds, Junko had the look of someone caught off guard. She then continued to kick Akuto with her cheeks dyed in the color of embarrassment.

"Stop that! How much humiliation must you put me through!?"

"Wait. You really should stop moving around so much…"

Their classmates were watching the two of them from a distance. The classmates could not hear their conversation, so they could only speculate what was going.

"Wow… That's the demon king for you. This is just cruel. He tricked her into letting her guard down since it's such a basic magic lesson and then he blasted her clothes off."

"And after stripping her, he gives her his vest… He has to be toying with her."

"And he only gives a slight smile as the class rep tries to resist! He must be trying to help set them straight?"

Only once Akuto mentioned the others did Junko realize their classmates were spreading some sort of rumor about them.

"D-don't tell me this is all part of some evil plan to humiliate me further."

Junko looked frightened and backed away while folding her hands in front of her body.

Akuto immediately denied it.

"No, of course not. As I've said before, I care a lot about you. I want to protect you as much as I can from these rumors that-…"

Before he could finish speaking, Junko's expression grew distorted and tears welled up in her eyes.

"You idiot! Why do you have to act like this!? Are you good or evil!? Choose one side and stick to it! And if you really did care about me, you would-…"

Junko trailed off, looked away from Akuto, and quickly ran off. Akuto did not even have time to try to stop her.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do now?"

Part 2

As Akuto remained standing in confusion, he was approached by Hiroshi who had refused to train with him. The boy was nodding as he always did when admiring something.

"Oh. Nice one, aniki. I am truly impressed."

"What are you talking about?"

"Teasing your woman like that is just so badass. And even in this beginner lesson, you managed to show off your power to the entire class. I only refused to be your partner because I thought you might try something like this."

Hiroshi was not trying to flatter him. He was honestly impressed. His eyes were glittering with pure light.

"There is a lot I want to say to that, but I'm not sure where to even start," complained Akuto.

He then noticed Mitsuko-sensei approaching. She placed her hands on her hips and gave a smile that looked more amused than bitter.

"You need to control your mana properly. Especially with how much power you have." Mitsuko-sensei adjusted her glasses and looked off in the direction Junko had disappeared. "She probably won't be attending her classes for a while. She can be quite pure-hearted."

"I'm sorry."

Akuto honestly lowered his head.

"Apologizing to me isn't going to help. You need to train your mind to make sure this does not happen again."

"Yeah, but wasn't this the beginner lesson for doing just that?" asked Akuto.

Mitsuko-sensei glanced upwards and said, "Yes, it was… Oh! I do know a fairly drastic measure you could take! Yes. It's a bit dangerous, but it's worth trying."

Mitsuko-sensei must have thought this was an excellent idea because she patted Akuto's shoulder looking quite happy.

"Why do you look so overjoyed?" asked Akuto suspiciously.

Mitsuko-sensei's eyes sparkled as she replied, "This school has a mental training technique that no student has gone through in years! It was stopped after it went badly for a few of the students!"

"I have one quick question."

"Don't worry. It isn't physically dangerous or anything. When I say it went badly I just meant it went badly."

"That wasn't my question. I want to know why you look so excited."

When Akuto pointed that out, Mitsuko-sensei wiped drool from her mouth with a look of realization.

"I-it's nothing. It isn't like anyone has died from this in the past or anything."

"I hope that's true…"

Akuto gave Mitsuko-sensei a cold look. He suspected she wanted to kill him in a legal fashion. He appreciated that she understood him to a certain extent rather than blindly fearing him like most of the students did, but she was interested in his powers as the demon king and seemed to want to cast necromancy on him after he died to perform experiments.

"So what kind of training is it?" asked Akuto.

Mitsuko-sensei nodded and replied, "It is known as the Mental Training Room. It is similar to the Zen meditation performed by Suhara followers."

Mitsuko-sensei's words seemed to shock Hiroshi.

"Eh!? Constant Magic Academy's famous Mental Training Room!?"

"Is it dangerous?" asked Akuto curiously.

Hiroshi looked like he was telling a ghost story as he continued.

"Yeah. Years ago, a student died while they were-…mgh."

Hiroshi was cut off when Mitsuko-sensei covered his mouth.

"Eh heh heh heh heh heh. Don't worry. You'll be fine. It's no problem at all."

She laughed, but not even Akuto was that dull.

"I think I'll pass…"

But Mitsuko-sensei quickly added, "Oh, um, I said it was like the Zen meditation performed by Suhara followers, right? If Hattori-san knew you had completed this training, she might forgive you."

This was nothing more than a desperate attempt to convince Akuto, but it was enough.

—I see. She might be right…

"In that case…"

Akuto returned to his dorm room after school. A look of displeasure appeared on his face when he saw the girl lying on his bed.

She had soft green hair, a beautiful face with doll-like perfection, and a body so ideal one would think an artist had sculpted it. However, she was lying on the bed and reading a manga magazine while munching on ningyou-yaki from a bag lying next to her. Despite her beauty, she was acting like a middle-aged housewife or an unemployed youth.

She was an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam and her name was Korone. She was an observer sent by the government. After it had been determined Akuto would become the demon king, she had been sent to live in his dorm room to observe him at all times.

"So you are back. It seems nothing out of the ordinary happened," said Korone without even looking toward Akuto.

Akuto could not help but be annoyed. Korone had originally followed him around 24/7, but she would occasionally disappear lately. And despite being an artificial human who never grew tired, he would always find her skipping out on her duties during those times.

"Are you even observing me? I think what happened in class qualifies as out of the ordinary."

"Do not worry. No one was injured," declared Korone.

"You saw it?" he asked doubtfully, but Korone did not hesitate.

"Yes. I can now monitor you remotely and I can arrive instantly no matter where I am."

As she spoke, Korone brought another ningyou-yaki to her mouth. This bothered Akuto an odd amount.

"Those are ningyou-yaki, right? Specifically, the seaweed ones from the capital?"

"Yes. Would you like one?"

"No, thanks. More importantly, can an artificial human eat?"

"I can. A chemical change inside my body converts it into energy. Only an insignificant amount, though."

"You don't have to do that, right? So why are you eating those?"

"Because they are delicious."

"That's the only reason?"

"Yes. And I will not gain weight no matter how much I eat."

"Well, you are an artificial human, so would gaining weight bother you?"

"No, and that is why I will not gain weight."

"Eh? Eh?"

Speaking with Korone often left Akuto confused. She liked to tease people with an apathetic demeanor. Akuto decided to ignore Korone and began searching for what he needed for his training.

"What are you doing?" asked Korone.

Akuto had no choice but to tell her about the Mental Training Room that Mitsuko-sensei had told him about. Korone unexpectedly stopped grabbing another ningyou-yaki and spoke.

"I will go with you."

"Eh?"

"I will go with you as your observer."

"Why?"

"Because it sounds fun."

Part 3

"…Even though you're always skipping out on your duty?"

"Is that a problem?"

"…No, not really."

Akuto gathered his gear. All he needed was a metal canteen and a waterproof bag. Mitsuko-sensei had told him he would need both.

After putting the canteen in the waterproof bag, he headed to the place Mitsuko-sensei had told him go to. Korone followed him.

"This place appears to be relatively uninhabited."

Korone was right. Akuto had been told to go to the area beyond a pond near the school building. It had been made into a garden for the students to relax in, but the dense thicket surrounding the area and the humidity from the pond kept most people away. It was wrapped in the same atmosphere as the poorly tended garden of a mansion in a declining rural area.

"Yes, I doubt many people would want to come here."

Akuto parted the thicket with his hands and walked across the disorderly grass. Eventually, he arrived at a square building with plaster walls. Each side was only as wide as someone's arm span. The door was so short he would have to crouch down to pass through and he would likely only be able to sit inside.

"I see. There really isn't much you could use this for besides mental training," said Akuto in an odd sort of admiration.

He crouched down and placed his hand on the door. The knob lit up and an artificial voice spoke.

<Once you enter this door, it will lock and cannot be opened from within for 12 hours. Prepare a means of emergency contact and then enter at your own risk.>

"So that's how it works," commented Korone.

"Seems that way. I guess I'll see you in 12 hours. I'll contact you with my student handbook's mana communication in an emergency."

Akuto nodded toward Korone and opened the door. The space surrounded by plaster walls contained nothing but tatami mats on the floor. He entered the cool and stale air and then shut the door.

"Why would you need to contact me in an emergency?"

"So you can open the door to let me out," said Akuto before realizing something was wrong. He turned to the side and found Korone. And the door had fully shut. "What are you doing in here with me!?"

"I said I would be going with you as your observer," she said calmly.

Akuto sighed. It was a small space for two. He doubted he could train his mind much like this.

—And I was actually looking forward to spending some time alone in here.

No outside light was let inside, so the only illumination was some dimly glowing mana covering the ceiling. Akuto looked around and spotted tiny writing covering every inch of the wall opposite the door. He looked closer and could tell some lengthy text had been carved there. Reading it in the dim light would prove difficult. When he focused mana in his fingertip to produce some light and read through a bit of it, he realized it was a portion of the imperial constitution.

—So this entire wall is covered in the preamble to the constitution. To read it all in this darkness, I need to control my mana to produce light. That must be how I train my mind.

"I was a bit worried, but I don't see how anyone could die as a result. It should be exhausting though."

Feeling relieved, Akuto sat on the tatami mats.

"Yes. There seem to be some strange rumors, but they must all be unfounded. Not even modern Suhara followers use this old-fashioned mental focusing technique. This room may have become a legend after people stopped using it."

With that comment, Korone sat down as well. The area was so small that Akuto and Korone's knees were forced against each other. Korone adjusted her position, but there was no other choice but to sit right up next to Akuto.

"Um…"

"Yes?"

"This place is cramped."

"Yes, it is."

"I meant that as a complaint."

"Your complaint will not make this room any larger or me any smaller."

"…"

"Please do not fall silent. Didn't you come here to train? Go right ahead and read the constitution on the wall there. It should be tedious, but this is training."

Korone sounded quite disagreeable. And she of course remained without emotion.

Akuto reluctantly looked over to the wall and focused on controlling the mana light, but then he noticed Korone slowly bringing her body closer to his.

"Um…"

"Yes?"

"Could you move away some?"

"I am helping you with your training. You must be able to concentrate even in this sort of situation."

Korone pressed her body up against his. She was an artificial human, but the soft sensation was identical to that of a real human. Akuto could not help but be distracted. He looked over at Korone, but she only stared back at him. The situation could not have been more awkward. He looked down and noticed that all of Korone's moving around had left her skirt just disheveled enough for her panties to become slightly visible. He now had no idea what to do.

"I don't need your help!"

Akuto crawled across the tatami mats on his knees to move away from Korone. The room was small, but there was enough space to leave a slight gap between the two of them. However, he felt a feminine body in the direction he fled as well.

"You circled around to the other side?"

Akuto looked over to complain further, but no one was there.

"?"

He turned around in confusion, but Korone was still in the same spot as before.

"I did not circle around."

"Eh?"

Akuto cautiously reached a hand out into empty space He felt something soft like a leather bag filled with water but a bit more firm.

"Ahhh!"

A scream came from empty air.

—Crap, I was right.

Having figured out what was going on, Akuto glared into the empty space.

"Keena, what are you doing in here?"

A long, drawn-out voice answered, "Because I heard you would be staying in here on your own, A-chan. I thought you needed a bento."

Akuto glanced upwards and saw something floating in midair. It was a bento wrapped in cloth.

"But why would you come in with me?" he grumbled.

The girl speaking to him from a seemingly empty space was Soga Keena. She was a failing student who wasn't very good at magic, so she always skipped out on the magic lessons. However, she somehow specialized in invisibility and flight, which required an excessive amount of focus for normal people. That was why she had a habit of turning herself invisible and floating around.

"Because the door closed on me," complained Keena as she made herself visible.

Her blazing red hair was her most noticeable characteristic. She wore her hair up and a few tufts stood straight up like antennae. Her face could be called gentle or vacant depending on one's opinion of her. Just looking at her had a way of inducing drowsiness.

However, the most noticeable feature at the moment was not her face; it was her lack of clothing. Keena's small breasts were floating fully exposed right in front of Akuto's eyes.

"W-wait a second!"

Akuto panicked and then Keena realized what she had done.

"Kyaaah!"

She folded up her arms and legs to cover herself.

Keena could only make herself invisible. She had to strip naked before disappearing, but she often forgot about her state of undress when she became visible again.

"It's dark in here, so I can't see anything clearly," said Akuto as he looked around.

He could not find anything else for Keena to wear, so he was forced to take off his own shirt and give it to her.

"I have a feeling I'm going to lose all of my clothes before long," he complained.

"My uniform would be too small," said Korone. She then glanced between Akuto and Keena before saying, "This room is quite small."

"How could you be so calm? This is kind of a big deal. We're all trapped in here for 12 hours."

Akuto held his head in his hands. All three of them had been inside from the beginning, but it felt a lot more cramped now that he could see Keena.

Nevertheless, Korone remained calm.

"It is no problem for me."

"Of course it isn't for you," said Akuto with a bit of anger mixed in.

"Calm down," said Keena soothingly. "Don't get mad, A-chan. Here, you get in a bad mood when you're hungry."

Keena held out the wrapped bento while wearing only a shirt.

"I don't think it has anything to do with hunger this time," argued Akuto, but Keena was not listening.

"Don't worry. You'll forget all about it once your stomach is full."

Keena smiled. Akuto was not sure how to respond. It was not that Keena had convinced him. It had more to do with how the dim light allowed him to vaguely see Keena wearing nothing but his shirt.

"No…um…I'll eat later."

Akuto averted his gaze.

"You need to train. You need to focus your mind," said Korone with intentionally bad timing.

"Shut up!" he shouted.

But he then calmed his mind and thought.

—Come to think of it, this actually is a good opportunity to focus my mind. I need to work on this training.

If he focused too much on the two bodies pressing up against him from either side, he would never get anything done. Akuto decided to focus on the small words of the constitution. He lit some mana light from his finger and forced his face up against the wall.

—Now, then. Time to start reading. Having no escape might actually help.

In only a few minutes, Akuto managed to fully focus on the text. But after a few minutes, he felt someone poking at his side.

"Ugh…What is it?"

Unsurprisingly, it was Keena poking him.

"Hey. Aren't you hungry?"

"No."

"…Aren't you hungry?"

"I said no."

"……Aren't you hungry?" asked Keena with a tilt of the head.

"Fine, I get it. You want to eat the bento, don't you?"

Akuto sighed and moved his head away from the wall. For some reason, he had a weakness when it came to Keena. While he was not particularly strong when it came to other girls, he could not resist at all when it came to Keena. He always gave in no matter what she did. Akuto guessed it had to do with knowing her from back in his orphanage days. Something about Keena prevented Akuto from opposing her.

Keena opened the bento. It contained several white rice balls.

"What's this one?" asked Akuto while pointing at one on the end.

"A rice ball!" replied Keena happily.

"I know that, but what kind."

"An excellent question! This is that brand with over 1000 years of tradition: Akitakomachi!" forcefully announced Keena.

"Okay, that's the brand of the rice. But what's inside?"

"I already told you: Akitakomachi."

"Eh?"

"It has Akitakomachi rice inside. The rice ball is made of Koshihikari."

"Oh…I see."

Akuto lost all will to resist and took a bite of the rice ball. If he just thought of it as a plain rice ball, it was good enough.

"The blend of the rice is the best part! Changing the ratio can turn it into an entirely different food! For example…"

Keena began extolling the wonders of white rice, but Akuto was used to this. He went back to reading the constitution while only half listening to her. Oddly enough, having Keena rambling in the background acted like background music and made it easier to concentrate.

—I see. Magical concentration is nothing special. I can just concentrate the same way I did at my part-time jobs when I was poor. I was going all out because this was magic, but I guess I was overthinking it.

As he was lost in his thoughts, a grain of rice flew from behind him and stuck to the word he was just about to read. He turned around to find that Keena had noticed he was not listening to her enthusiastic speech. She ate a rice ball while complaining loudly.

"After going on about all of that crap, you should be more careful with your rice," he said as he grabbed the grain of rice off of the wall.

The grain of rice had stuck to the wall like glue, but it should not have been difficult to remove. However, Akuto noticed something odd. It felt like a portion of the wall came off with the grain.

"What?"

He looked more closely at the wall there. It seemed a piece of paper had been attached to the wall and then the words of the constitution it covered up had been written on top of it to hide the paper's existence.

Akuto peeled off the paper. It was parchment. Normal paper could be found anywhere, so parchment was rarely used.

The parchment had a map and some text on it. All of the lines had been burned into the parchment with magic. It would have been faster to write it out by hand, so someone had gone out of their way to ensure it would last. Someone had placed it here in the hopes that someone would eventually find it.

"This would be a lot of effort for a simple prank," commented Akuto.

Keena's eyes sparkles as she peered at the parchment in Akuto's hand.

"Hey, is that a treasure map, A-chan!?" she said excitedly.

"Don't be silly. This isn't-…huh?"

Part 4

Akuto read the writing and, to his surprise, it really was a treasure map. Below the reliably drawn map, the following words were written:

<To the brave one who has found this map. The sealed treasure will reveal itself when the three hidden keys are gathered from the three locations marked on this map. But do not forget: any who know what the treasure is will always be searching for it. Only those with a selfless heart and those willing to risk their life should search for the treasure. Those without these qualifications will find only death. This is not a threat. It is my final request as I head to my death. -K >

The K at the end was a signature. Whoever that initial belonged to did not seem to be joking around, but none of the more important information was mentioned.

"What is this?" said Akuto in puzzlement.

"Ah!" said Keena. "This is a map of the school!"

"Eh? It is?"

Akuto checked the map. He was new enough at the school that he had not initially noticed, but it did seem the school grounds were drawn on the map.

"It can be hard to tell because of how large the school grounds are, but this is the school building, this is the forest out back, and this is the mountain you can see from the roof."

Keena pointed at various points on the map, but it still did not quite hit home for Akuto because he had never walked around the entire school grounds. And then Korone finally spoke up.

"The scale of the map is arbitrary, but it shows an area approximately 40 kilometers across. It would take two hours with flight magic or half a day by foot."

"I see. How old is the parchment?" asked Akuto.

"If you are asking when the parchment itself was made, quite old. It is around 50 years old. If you are asking about the writing, I cannot say as the change was made with magic," analyzed Korone instantly.

"So it's no more than 50 years old. And we know nothing more than that."

"It could have been written yesterday or 50 years ago."

"Hm. It's a bit interesting, but it doesn't really matter to me. It might have been here for years since no one uses this place, but someone might have put it here today as a prank when they heard I would be using it."

With that coolheaded comment, Akuto tried to put the map back where it had been. However, Keena snatched it from him.

"This is a treasure map, A-chan!"

Keena looked like she was in a dream.

"I know," he replied bluntly.

"Treasures are filled with dreams. Just imagine. Pirates of ancient times probably spent all their lives gathering this treasure."

Keena clasped her hands together in front of her chest and looked off in an odd direction.

"This has been a landlocked area for over 4000 years," pointed out Akuto, but she was not listening.

"Ahh, if only I was a boy! I would go out and face any danger! I would fight the monsters protecting the keys and defeat them all! But I would not kill them. If I killed them, I would lose the right to take the treasure! That is where all the strong adventurers before me failed!"

Akuto had forgotten that Keena could not be stopped once she fell into one of her delusions. If you went along with it, there would be no end of it. He had believed one of her delusions when they first met and had paid for it.

"Yeah, that would be nice," he said offhandedly and returned to his training.

But he received an unexpected reply.

"A-chan…"

Keena had suddenly grown meek and was fidgeting around. Akuto could not help but find this odd.

"What is it?"

Keena trembled as if trying to endure something.

"I gotta pee."

"Wait, wait, wait…"

Akuto was not sure what to do. He looked around and spotted the canteen and waterproof bag he had brought with him.

"So, that's what the bag is for for!"

The canteen contained water. Going 12 hours without water was dangerous. And if he was trapped in here for 12 hours…

"Here, use this."

Akuto held out the waterproof bag.

"Ehh!? No! That's too embarrassing!" argued Keena.

"It's better than wetting yourself! Just face away from me!"

"No!"

"It's embarrassing for me too! I might not be able to hold it either at some point!"

"I don't want that either! I don't want to see you do that!"

As Akuto and Keena argued, Korone suddenly spoke up.

"If you need a means of disposing of your urine, I can drink it."

Unsurprisingly, both Akuto and Keena's argument froze over when the two of them heard that.

"Eh?"

"W-wait…"

But Korone only calmly said, "Do not worry. A chemical change inside my body will convert it into energy. Only an insignificant amount, though."

"That is not the issue here!"

"Waaaahhhhn! No! Let me out!" cried Keena.

When Korone saw that, she only shrugged apathetically.

"That was a joke. For one, it does not taste good."

"Regardless, that does not resolve this situation! And how do you know how it tastes?"

Afterwards, Akuto could not remember what had happened then. He simply assumed they somehow solved the problem with magic.

When Akuto awoke the next morning, he retrieved the map from Korone who was lying in the covered shelf near the roof. If he had left it out, Keena would likely have taken it, so he had left it with Korone. He of course had no intention of doing anything with it. To avoid any trouble, he planned to discuss it with the student council president.

After arriving at school, Akuto stopped by the student council room before class. The president always held a meeting with the other officers before classes began and he was cheerfully invited in. Akuto was the head public

morals officer, so his position required close coordination with the student council.

"What is it, Sai-kun?" asked the president sociably.

She wore her usual stylish hat that seemed to be her trademark. She was short and had a youthful appearance. She almost looked like a pre-teen, but she was actually a third year. Despite how she looked, she was oddly intimidating. Akuto had heard nothing about how powerful she was, but since she was the student council president in a school that was so fixated on using magic in combat related situations, she was probably very skilled.

Akuto showed her the map. When he explained how he had found it, the president's eyes widened slightly. But then she glanced between Akuto and the map in disinterest.

"It's probably some childish prank."

"I think so too, but some of the students might try to attempt a treasure hunt if this gets out."

The president smiled at that.

"You have a point. I will hold onto it, then. Please keep this confidential."

The president then glanced over at the three officers. They gathered around the president's desk.

"Sorry, but we always have plenty of work in the morning," she said with a shooing motion.

Akuto bowed and left the room. As he did, he could hear the three officers talking loudly.

"President, isn't this a map of the school, gya?"

"I think it is, guga."

"Some of the areas abandoned during the war are marked, arinsu."

From the odd ways they spoke, Akuto decided they must all be oddly individual people, but he could no longer hear them as soon as he stepped outside. They seemed to be using some sort of magic to prevent their voices from reaching outside, but Akuto did not mind.

Junko wouldn't attend class and Keena was skipping as always.

—Keena is one thing, but what is Hattori-san doing?

By the time the first class ended, Akuto was holding his head in worry, but then he noticed a commotion out in the hallway. It wasn't often he came across a commotion that had nothing to do with him. He walked out of the classroom and found a crowd of students gathered around the wall.

—What is this? Wait, it can't be!

Akuto approached the wall and the students gathered there moved aside to make a path for him with tremendous speed. However, Akuto did not have time to worry about how much they feared him. A copy of the map had been placed on the wall.

—Keena!

He could think of no other possibility. As Akuto stood there dumbfounded, Hiroshi ran over to him.

"Aniki! What's with this treasure map? Keena-chan has been putting it up everywhere. Is this a prank?" asked Hiroshi.

Akuto now had no doubt that Keena was responsible. She had the ability to make herself invisible, so she would have been able to steal the map at some point, copy it, and then return it.

"This is no prank," Akuto said with his voiced raised.

He wanted everyone around him to hear him. Hiroshi decided to raise his voice too.

"It's not a prank!? Then it's a game you've prepared, isn't it!? I see! You hid the treasure and then placed monsters at each of these points! Then you'll take in anyone who clears the game as your followers!"

Hiroshi's assumption caused a stir among the surrounding students. Akuto panicked. He didn't want yet another rumor spreading around.

"That is not what this is," he denied.

However, Hiroshi only raised his voice further.

"Then is it a real map you found, aniki!?"

"No. I have no idea whether it's real or not."

He tried to deny it, but he found it hard to find the words when he did not know any of the facts himself.

"What am I supposed to do?" he muttered.

It had already spread, so suppressing it was a lost cause. He got a very bad feeling when his classmates were oddly excited even as class started, but there was nothing he could do.

—I can only hope this really is just a prank.

But the situation took an odd turn after that.

Towards the end of lunch period, a stretcher carrying someone flew by in front of Akuto as he was returning to the classroom after having lunch with Hiroshi. The flying device was used to carry the injured to the infirmary. This school produced a lot of injuries and this device was used to transport anyone too badly injured to move on their own. This stretcher carried a male student. He was conscious, but his face was horribly pale and he was muttering, "A monster…"

"Don't tell me…" said Akuto.

"He probably went treasure hunting," replied Hiroshi.

Hiroshi ran off, found a friend of the injured boy from within the crowd of onlookers, and asked that friend what happened. Hiroshi acted quickly with this sort of thing.

"Some of the students who are especially good at flight flew off to go treasure hunting and came back with serious injuries! This thing is the real deal!"

Hiroshi sounded excited.

—No, this isn't normal.

Akuto silently folded his arms as he thought. He must have had a rather serious look because the students around him ran away in fear and Hiroshi rejoiced that Akuto had made some sort of decision. However, Akuto himself did not notice any of this.

Akuto was not the only one who felt something odd about this treasure map.

Etou Fujiko did as well.

On the surface, she was the academy's greatest beauty, had top grades, was head of the girls' dorm, and was the target of admiration of boys and girls alike. However, she was secretly a black magician who found great pleasure in controlling others. Just the other day, she had put together a scheme to make Akuto hers, but it had backfired on her in a strange way.

Fujiko was currently hiding away from prying eyes in the basement. She had taken a room in the underground labyrinth used during the war and remodeled it for her research in black magic. She always used it when she wanted to be alone, but she was here for a different reason today. Fujiko always kept a bottled severed head in the room. She had used necromancy, forbidden magic, to reanimate her older brother. He was usually good for nothing more than an inane chat, but he was the reason she was here today.

The gloomy room was covered in velvet and Fujiko was showing a copy of that treasure map to the severed head in the glass container.

"This is your handwriting, isn't it?"

"No, I have never seen that map before," immediately replied her brother.

"You can't possibly not know anything about this," denied Fujiko, but she fell silent immediately afterwards.

She understood that necromancy did not truly resurrect the dead. It was nothing more than a system that provided an estimated answer based on the stored records of their past. And that meant a spirit could not lie.

"But I know that this is your handwriting…"

She could not be mistaken about the handwriting of someone so dear to her. However, the rule that spirits could not lie was absolute.

Almost everyone in this country had been baptized into some religion or another. That baptism meant one was under the control of that god. When people said their god was watching, it wasn't a metaphor. The gods used mana to record every action humans took.

"So you truly have no memory of the locations on this map?"

Fujiko changed the question.

Her brother replied that he did not.

—He graduated from the academy, so it is impossible for him to have no memories of it whatsoever.

Was it possible someone had erased the records? The gods treated everyone equally. That meant the path to the blessings of the gods (i.e. the ability to use magic) was open to everyone. However, it was impossible to do anything that affected the gods. The system was made so that the gods themselves would reject any actions that affected them.

"Hey, onii-sama. I am getting a headache, so excuse me."

Sensing something dangerous, Fujiko returned aboveground using a hidden underground passageway. She really was getting a headache. The contradiction revived from the bottom of her heart was causing her quite a bit of trouble.

Once she appeared in the normal hallways, Fujiko's demeanor had transformed into that of the perfect high-class girl. The students chatting with each other during lunch break turned admiring eyes in her direction. When she lowered her head in greeting, they all greeted her as if they were cheering.

That greeting was normal, but Fujiko froze in place when she spotted a certain female student. Fujiko was the girls' dorm leader, so she had memorized what all the girls in the school looked like. Even if she could not immediately recall some of their names, she would recognize them. However, she did not recognize this girl.

This girl had long green hair tied into a ponytail. Her uniform was not worn entirely properly, so she gave an untidy impression. The girl had clear facial features and she was certainly beautiful, but something about her seemed off balance. It was only after reflexively greeting her that Fujiko realized it was due to the girl's eyes and overall expression showing her emotions too clearly.

"Good day," said Fujiko with a bow.

The girl's eyes opened wide and she put on a look of deep interest.

"Good day? Now you are interesting!"

"Oh? Am I?" replied Fujiko with a smile and sensing danger.

Rather than just being impolite, this girl possessed something that left people uneasy.

The girl laughed loudly and said, "You are! After all, you're not that kind of person! I can tell just from looking at you. You're a cruel witch deep down and there's no saving someone like you."

"H-how rude."

Fujiko just barely managed to maintain her composure, but she was still overpowered by this girl.

"Ah ha ha ha! If you're gonna lie, you can't panic when someone finds out! It's no fun otherwise, Etou Fujiko!"

With that unsophisticated comment, the girl spread her arms and spun around on the spot.

"You're not a student of this academy, are you!?"

Fujiko was certain of that now, so she quickly prepared to fire a mana ball from her right hand. However, the girl jumped back too quickly for her.

"I'm not a student, but I do have permission to enter the academy! Etou Fujiko, if you hide the truth like this, you'll only make more enemies. Like me for example!"

After that comment from the girl, even Fujiko had trouble keeping her expression steady. She ended her attack and remained smiling as she watched the girl leave. The girl ran off quite quickly.

"Onee-sama, who was that girl?"

Students who had heard the commotion gathered worriedly around Fujiko. Fujiko played the role of the high-class girl by placing a hand on her cheek and choosing the words of a victim.

"I do not know. Some strange girl must have snuck into the school. We need to inform the teachers."

For a while afterwards, keeping the facade required some effort.

Meanwhile, Junko was alone in her room after Akuto had blasted her clothes off and she had ran away. She was of course embarrassed to be stripped of her clothes in front of the entire class, but a night had passed since then and she had been consoled by her friends at dinner the previous night. She had mostly calmed down from that. However, some strange feeling came over her when she was alone and she did not know what to do.

"That idiot! That idiot! That idiot!"

She had spent all day in her futon, but she could not help but flail her limbs around meaninglessly whenever she saw Akuto's vest sitting on top of that futon. She could have placed it somewhere farther away, but Junko had convinced herself she had nowhere else to put it.

—I need to think about returning it to him. I of course have to thank him, but he will only make fun of me if I sound like an idiot when I do. And how am I supposed to return it anyway? Do I wash it first? It's just a vest and it isn't dirty, so it should be fine as is.

Junko picked it up to search for a stain on the inside. That was where it had touched her bare skin, so it would be embarrassing if there was some stain there.

—No, wait. Is it the smell that's the problem?

Suddenly worried, Junko held the inside of the vest to her face.

—This is his-…

With that sudden realization, Junko's face explosively reddened and she took the vest away from her face. After bringing her breathing under control, she stood up from her futon. She then rushed around to every corner of the room swinging her arms around everywhere.

"Soga! Soga Keena! You aren't spying on me, are you!?"

She had just remembered that Keena had once turned invisible and watched her in her room. After making completely certain no one else was in the room, Junko was finally able to relax. She made sure the door was locked and then sat seiza-style on the futon.

She picked up Akuto's vest with trembling hands, closed her eyes, and wrapped it around her like she was embracing it. She then slowly brought the inside of the vest up to her face.

—Ah… This feeling…

And then her student handbook rang.

"Hyaaahhh!"

She screamed and jumped a full meter into the air. She frantically made sure no one was looking, but it seemed no one was. She picked up her student handbook and saw she had a message from her family. Junko took a deep breath to calm down and then read it.

She grew perfectly calm in an instant. At first glance, the message seemed innocuous enough, but it was a coded message of the type used by the Hattori family. Once decoded it said the following:

<A member of the Teruya family has taken action. Wait for a meeting at the given location.>

—Is it her?

A stern look entered Junko's eyes. That was a family that hers had a long history with.

Chapter 2: Who is that Girl?

Part 1

Akuto had a bad feeling. However, this was no vague foreboding; it was a grounded prediction. And his unpleasant prediction turned out to be right on target. As he rested in the dorm once night fell, more and more injured students were brought to the dining hall. Only the night shift was in the infirmary, so they could not treat everyone's injuries there.

Akuto had been sipping on some after-dinner tea with Hiroshi and Korone, but more and more tables had to be moved out of the way to fit the male students who were lined up like giant tunas in a fish market. And if this was a fish market, the fishermen must have gotten an excellent haul. The number of injured continued to grow. The students who were followers of Ko Ro and hoped to be doctors rushed around performing first aid.

"This is all because they went treasure hunting, isn't it?" asked Akuto.

"That's right, aniki," replied Hiroshi.

"Why do they feel the need to get injured over something as childish as a treasure hunt?"

As soon as Akuto said that, the dining hall's atmosphere suddenly froze over. The other students thought he was insulting the injured. Looks of anger and hatred gathered on him. After all, the students here valued reckless actions and saw commotions like this as a virtue.

—Crap.

Surprisingly, Akuto was sensitive to that sort of atmosphere. He stood up and walked over to a first year treating the wounds of a second year. He put on his biggest smile as he spoke.

"I am actually a follower of Ko Ro, too. If you tell me how to perform healing magic, I can help. And even if you don't, I can help in some other way."

The two student's faces paled to an even greater extent than if he was some quack of a doctor who would most certainly kill the injured student. They both could only shake their trembling heads.

"You don't need to be afraid of me. I'm not going to hurt you."

Akuto crouched down and the first year performing the healing cried out and ran away. The badly injured second year shouted "I'm healed! I'm healed! I really am!", got down from the table, and hopped away on his one good leg. "O-okay, sorry. I'll just stay out of the way."

Akuto backed away and returned to his seat.

He asked Korone, "Can you help them attend to the injured?"

"Yes. I have been instructed to act according to the wishes of my subject."

Korone began walking around to the different injured students. She was very popular. All of the injured students frantically waved their hands to draw her over to them as she pulled a healing device out of her bag.

As Akuto watched Korone heal the students one after another, he decided this would make it easier to speak with the injured. He approached a nearby boy and asked a question as gently as possible.

"So were you attacked by something?"

The boy looked shocked, but he responded with an almost sulking look rather than falling silent. He was a large first year who likely took pride in his strength.

"Yes. I was attacked before I even knew what was going on. That thing was powerful."

"Are you sure?" asked Akuto.

The first year and all the others turned to look at Akuto. The delicate atmosphere that had temporarily left fell back over the dining hall.

—I see. They took that to mean anyone who lost to it was just weak. I wasn't sure what to say, so I was simply asking if this thing was really there.

Upon realizing that, Akuto cleared his throat and chose his words carefully.

"My apologies. I was asking if this monster really did exist. After all, look how many of you have been injured. If all of you attacked it together, surely you could handle even a powerful monster."

"We didn't attack it together. We were all separate," said the first year in a blunt but annoyed tone of voice.

"Then did you all attack it at different times?"

"We didn't attack it at all."

"Oh, so it attacked you. But with this many people, couldn't you have joined together then?"

Akuto asked this because he was legitimately curious, but the first year's reply was filled with irritation.

"You don't go treasure hunting in a big group. We all headed out on our own. No team was bigger than two people."

"Oh, that's right!" said Akuto loudly when he finally caught on. "You were treasure hunting! You all wanted to get there ahead of everyone else! My apologies once more. I completely forgot about that! If it hadn't been for that selfishness, such a large number of people would never have been injured!"

The dining hall froze over and silence fell.

—Oh, crap. I said something else that could be taken the wrong way.

Akuto raised his voice so everyone could hear as he tried to smooth things over.

"No, I just wanted to say that you would have had better results if you had worked together. Everyone in this school is a valiant warrior, right? If you had some excellent commander, you would be able to produce quite a bit of power."

The first year must have been so irritated he no longer cared because his next statement was filled with contempt.

"Shut up. We don't have anyone to act as a leader."

"What about the ranking system? If you let the person ranked at the top command you…"

At that point, Akuto realized something. It had not occurred to him until he had already spoken.

—Oh, no. I'm the one that defeated the people at the top of the rankings!

Akuto was unsure of what to say now.

The surrounding students were muttering among themselves.

"Is he saying this would have gone better if he led us?"

"He's saying we should give in to the great demon king."

"Wait, so did the demon king set up this entire thing? Was he planning this?"

"Come to think of it, he was the one that found the map and it was his girl that spread it around."

The situation had taken a turn for the worse. The gazes that gathered on Akuto now were a mixture of cold looks and fearful ones.

Akuto shook his head and stood up.

"That's not what happened! I would gain nothing from doing that! All I have done is point out your weaknesses! However, I had no intention of criticizing you. I simply said you should work together! For example, if everyone shares their information on what they were attacked by, you should be able to work out a strategy for fighting it."

One of Akuto's greatest weaknesses was his bad habit of trying to make himself look good at times like this. However, he did have a decent argument here, so the grumbling injured students gradually began exchanging information with those around them.

"It turned into a fog, so my attacks didn't work."

"That's what got me too. And it was too dark to tell for sure, but I think there were a bunch of bugs flying around. I couldn't figure out where to attack."

"That's right. The fog was the main body that attacked by controlling those bug-things. There was nothing I could do."

As they spoke, they eventually began discussing how to defeat this enemy. The discussion grew quite heated which was fine, but it quickly shifted over to fighting over who would play what role.

"Like I said, the decoy just has to draw the bugs away."

"Yeah, but who acts as the decoy!?"

"Someone who's good at running away."

"Don't be stupid. The decoy has always been the guy with the thickest armor."

"What? Are you saying I'm wrong? And don't call me stupid."

"That's not the point. Your way of thinking will mean we have to change who takes command."

"That's right. Who will take command anyway? Are we going to have a tournament to decide?"

"If we did that, it would end up being a fight over who gets the treasure in the end."

"Well, what's wrong with that? Then we'd know who the truly strong ones are."

Killing intent began to fill the room. Akuto had been the one who created this situation, so he raised his voice to put a stop to it.

"Everyone calm down! You don't need to fight over this. You don't even know if this treasure exists. And even if it does, it seems to have been left there for a long time. How about you just assume there is nothing there? That will bring everything back to how it was beforehand."

But his words only needlessly fanned the flames.

"You're the one who found the map!"

"This isn't about the treasure anymore! We're going to fight that monster to take our revenge!

The injured students began making a fuss. It rubbed Akuto the wrong way how they had switched over to an objective of revenge. He felt that was nothing more than hiding their own weakness.

"Then why don't you go back on your own and lose again! I can't speak with fools who refuse to face their own weakness! Why do you refuse to work together!?" he shouted in annoyance.

His voice was so loud that everyone in the room froze in place.

—I've done it again…

However, it was too late to stop now. It was in everyone's best interests if he used this situation to bring an end to this treasure hunt.

"The incompetent should not go on risk their lives just to look good! If you want to go, do so after proving your power! Do not sneak around for your own self-interest if you do not have the guts to do that! That is all I wish to say!"

Akuto ended his speech by slamming his hands down on the table. He began sweating from both embarrassment and regret, but after that challenge, he might be attacked in his sleep if he tried to back out now. He straightened his back, glanced forcefully across the entire room, and boldly walked out of the dining hall.

Hiroshi followed him while shedding tears of passion.

"That's my aniki for you! You were so cool!"

"That isn't what I was going for."

"Don't be so modest! …Oh, I get it! Instead of conquering the academy by force, you plan to get everyone to naturally revere you! And you're teaching them how to make brave decisions on their own! You have such foresight! I always learn so much from you!"

"Okay… That's good…"

Akuto did not have the energy to argue with Hiroshi, so he continued on as energetic as ever.

"Yes! I'm so glad I've stuck with you! And I of course used a Speaker to broadcast that speech throughout the dorms!"

"To both dorms?"

"Of course!" replied Hiroshi with great satisfaction.

—I can already tell this is going to get a lot worse…

Akuto felt a headache coming on. He soon realized worrying about this would not help, so he stopped thinking about it.

Part 2

The following day, Akuto received a summons in the early morning. It was from the student council president. Akuto was an early enough riser that he was already awake when she contacted him, but the president herself sounded tired. Once he arrived in the student council office, the president

was resting her shoulders on her desk and looked like she was about to nod off.

"Sorry about calling you here so early. Um, I heard that speech yesterday. That thrilling one."

Akuto could not tell if she was displeased or just tired, so he was unsure on how to reply. She was a girl yet she looked like an oddly intimidating boy, so her expressions were hard to read.

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"That was embarrassing," said Akuto as he bowed his head.

"No, it's all right. It pained me to see all those injuries, too. The reason I have summoned you here is so you can use your authority as head public morals officer to give an official command banning the treasure hunt. You can do so at the morning assembly," explained the president with a yawn.

"An official command?"

"Yes. The public morals committee has the authority and you can punish the students who disobey. Doing so too often would turn this into a reign of terror, of course. At any rate, your speech yesterday more or less said anyone strong could go. You know how dangerous that is, right?"

"You're right. I apologize for saying all that without permission."

"Nnn, it's not really a big deal. And if you're going to apologize, it should be for breaking your promise not to tell anyone about that map."

"I am sorry about that. I should have watched over it more carefully."

"No, as long as you apologize. And to be honest, it might have gotten out from here."

The president laughed lightly.

When Akuto thought about it, he had left the map with Korone and she would not have let her guard down. That meant Keena would have had to steal it from the student council office. However, he saw no reason to point that out.

"I will take responsibility by announcing the official command," promised Akuto before glancing around the student council office. "Are the three officers not with you?"

"No. They had some minor business to take care of. They'll be back in time for the morning assembly."

The president then drove Akuto out of the room so she could announce the special morning assembly.

An hour later, the entire student body was lined up in the schoolyard. Both the middle school and high school were there, so it was quite a sight. Akuto and the student council president stood in front of them all. An artificial creature known as a Speaker was floating in the center of the

podium placed in the schoolyard, so the words of whoever stood on the podium could be heard by all present company.

—Looks like they aren't here.

Akuto noticed that Junko and Keena were missing from the line of students from Class 1A. He understood that neither of them would want to face Akuto right now, but it still bothered him that they were missing.

As he thought about that, the student council president finished her greeting from atop the podium. However, Akuto had not been lost in thought for all that long. All the president had said was, "Good morning, everyone. Now, the head public morals officer has something to tell you."

Akuto frantically stepped up onto the podium. Most people would be nervous while standing in front of the school's entire student body, but Akuto was not one of those people. He put together the words in his head, gave a short greeting, and began to get to the topic at hand. But what happened next stopped even Akuto from continuing.

"Sai Akutooo! I just have to prove I'm powerful, right? Then that's what I'll do!"

The next thing Akuto knew, a girl had jumped up from the lines of students. She had long green hair tied into a ponytail. After jumping several meters up into the air, she rotated around with her hair waving around, stuck her right leg out, and then began gliding directly toward Akuto.

"Gooo! Exploding Midair Triangle Kick!" she shouted while focusing mana in her right foot.

As that foot began to glow, it shot straight for Akuto's face.

—Not good.

Akuto took a step to the right atop the podium. He had enough time to easily evade the kick. However, Akuto quickly realized he had been too naïve. The way the girl had been gliding across at an unnatural trajectory through the air showed she was flying at high speed rather than falling. She was moving at tremendous speed, but she could still control her flight. And as proof, she immediately redirected her kick towards his face.

—Should I knock it aside with my hand? No, then I would lose control of my mana!

Akuto was unsure what to do. He could not allow himself to lose control of his mana and cause an explosion here. However, he could not deflect this kick without using mana.

—That means I have to avoid it at the last second!

Akuto made up his mind almost instantly. If he moved aside now, her foot would simply follow suit. In that case, he would have to move his head out of the way right before the kick landed.

"Take this! Right on target!" shouted the girl confidently.

However, Akuto's reflexes were better than the girl had expected. He swung his head to the side at the last moment as if turning away from her. He just barely managed to avoid her glowing foot.

"I missed!?" shouted the girl.

—I did it!

Akuto gave an internal cheer.

But in the next instant…

With a silly-sounding squishing noise, Akuto felt something soft on his face. His vision went completely black. For an instant, he was unsure what had happened. His cheeks were strongly trapped between two soft objects. He felt like some soft cloth was covering his head.

"Kyaaah! Wait! No!"

When he heard that scream from above his head, Akuto finally realized what had happened.

The girl was straddling his face. He was still standing, so it was something like a reverse piggyback ride.

"Wah! Wait!"

Akuto could not just throw the girl off of him, so he had no choice but to remain standing where he was.

It must have been a ridiculous sight for anyone watching. And there were plenty of people watching. Basically, Akuto was standing upright with his head stuck up a girl's skirt and his face pressed against her crotch while the entire student body watched on.

"What are you doing, Sai Akuto!?"

The girl must have been unable to concentrate enough to control her mana because she didn't take flight again. She complained to Akuto while working to keep her balance.

"You're the one that tried to kick me!"

"Hyaah! Don't talk! It tickles!"

"Oh, sorr-…"

"I said don't talk! Don't move!"

"I won't, so you climb down!"

"Hyah! I-I'm stuck. I can't move! I'm going to fall!"

"Then don't move. I'll lower you down."

Akuto felt around until he had his hands around the girl's waist, lifted her up to remove her legs from his shoulders, and then tried to lower her down while almost embracing her. The girl slowly slid down his body with her legs wrapped around his body.

But when he had lowered the girl far enough that her face was right in front of his, she tightened her legs around his body so she could not be lowered any further.

"Hurry up and get down," he said.

The girl before him had clear facial features and was very beautiful, but she seemed to show her emotions too clearly so she seemed somehow off balance. This was the same girl who had challenged Fujiko the day before.

"What is it?" asked Akuto in confusion.

The girl's face was only about 10 cm from his. Her breath tickled him.

"You're even more handsome up close," she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Her legs were still wrapped around his waist, so she was now hanging down in front of him.

"Thanks, but could you get off of me?" said Akuto while feigning calm.

The situation may have just been so strange his senses had numbed over, but not even he was sure. It was also possible his odd desire to look good prevented him from letting him lose his cool in front of others. Either way, he kept his back straight and reacted coolly as this girl embraced him.

"You're quite interesting! Hey, why did you dodge my kick like that?"

The girl had a smile similar to a child who had found a new toy.

In the hopes that she would climb down quickly, Akuto responded to her question while facing away.

"If I tried to block it, I would have lost control over my mana and caused a giant explosion. I just have too much power. Since you were obviously controlling your path, I decided to dodge at the last second. I thought you might have flown behind me and hurt yourself if I had gone the other way. If you understand, then please get down."

However, it seemed Akuto's words had only amused the girl further.

"You're amazing! You thought through all that in just an instant! I've only ever met one other guy like you! Whose woman should I be? If you want, we can do it right here and now."

The girl began thrusting her hips against Akuto. Her crotch was in the perfect position to press up against Akuto's hips, so it was an unquestionably very obscene action.

"Get off of me."

Akuto began to grow a bit flustered and he removed the girl's arms from around his neck. However, the girl's legs were strong enough that she could hang on without her arms. And once she saw an opening, she wrapped her arms around his neck again.

—What is with this girl?

Akuto looked around in hopes of finding help. The student council president only gave an odd bitter smile and spun her arm around to tell him to hurry up and do what he came here to do. Meanwhile, the teachers were too dumbfounded to do anything and the students had turned into a sea of muttering.

"Wait, wait. What is going on…?"

"Don't tell me they're going to do it in front of everyone…"

"I think they might be already."

"I can't tell with the skirt in the way, but is she not wearing any panties under there?"

"But even if he's the demon king, isn't he a bit too calm for that?"

"No, can't villains take a woman without so much as changing their expression?"

"Y-you're right… But seeing this makes me feel like I've lost to him as a guy…"

"He's doing it in front of the entire student body… There's no way we can match that…"

—Wait! What the hell is going on here!?"

Akuto was utterly confused, but he was unable to get too forceful with a girl even in a situation like this. He calmly cleared his throat and shouted as loudly as he could.

"Silence!"

His voice was amplified by the Speaker, so it resounded throughout the schoolyard with a bit of feedback. After gathering the student's attention, he cleared his throat once more. The schoolyard was covered in silence as everyone's attention was directed towards him.

"Everyone! Yesterday, I said you should prove your strength before pursuing the treasure. It seems she took me at my word and challenged me. However, you should think of that as wasted effort."

Akuto had given up on removing the girl and instead spoke with her still hanging onto him. His statement caused another wave of muttering to spread throughout the students.

"I see. He's saying he'll do the same thing to anyone who challenges him."

"He must have used some kind of magic to seduce her."

"Did he do something when he had his face pressed against her crotch?"

Those fearful voices spread through the students.

—No, you misunderstand… But I guess I can't blame any of you. There is something seriously wrong with this girl! Please understand that!

While Akuto shouted internally, he knew that would never resolve the situation. He had to carry out his duty and then step down from the podium as quickly as possible.

"I am using my authority as head public morals officer to ban anyone from attempting the treasure hunt! Anyone who disobeys should expect to be punished! That is all I-…"

As Akuto tried to conclude his statement, he was cut off by the students. They were all booing his ban.

—In a normal situation, I could have phrased it in some way that restrained their dissatisfaction, but I can't persuade anyone like this.

Akuto was troubled, but then he heard a voice from nearby. The girl was speaking up so the Speaker would pick up her voice.

"You can't go back on your word word. If you think we're not good enough, then do it yourself."

The students cheered at that.

Some of them began shouting their support of the idea.

"That's right! Why don't you go and get the treasure!?"

"If you think we're weak, then you should take responsibility!"

"Don't take all the treasure for yourself!"

Akuto was unsure how to handle this hostile reaction, so he turned toward the student council president. The president made a shooing motion as if to say he could do whatever he wanted.

—Well, at least no more students will risk their lives anymore.

Akuto made up his mind.

"Understood. I will go. However, all other students are banned from approaching within one kilometer of the locations marked on the map."

With that announcement, Akuto stepped down from the podium. Once he did, the girl finally stood on her own two legs. Akuto pointed at her in order to ask the president who the girl was, but the president only shrugged.

"Who are you?" asked Akuto.

The girl shook her ponytail and replied, "Teruya Eiko. I was just wanted to tease you, but it looks like we might get to know each other a lot better. It would be worth remembering my name."

Part 3

"Just try to do something about it over the weekend starting tomorrow. And if you fail and try to hide it, at least hide it well."

From her attitude, it was clear the student council president did not approve of Akuto going off treasure hunting. After that speech, she had called him to the student council office to lecture him.

"I'm sorry. And I only have to find out what this monster is, don't I? I will be treating that as my goal," he replied.

The three officers (vice president, secretary, and treasurer) had returned and were giving Akuto resentful looks, so he had been trying to defend his case.

However, the three's harsh looks did not disappear. They were all third year girls with an odd intensity to them. The vice president had bold eyebrows and gave a wild impression. The secretary was quite tall for a girl and always seemed to be without emotion. The treasurer was slender and beautiful, but her skin went beyond white and approached being sickly pale.

Akuto could instinctually tell that the three of them were not normal girls and did not want to displease them, but it seemed their moods were not going to improve.

"Don't worry. I won't cause any problems for you," said Akuto once more.

"Oh," began the president as if she had something to say. "Um, if you do fail, we won't tell anyone, so you can just come back. Yes, that's fine. That would be perfectly fine."

She seemed to be vaguely agreeing with him, but…

"You make it sound like you want me to fail," he said in confusion.

She nodded and said, "You can take it that way if you like. We just want to forget any of this ever happened."

"In that case, you should have stopped that strange girl. As the student council president, you should not just ignore something like that," protested Akuto in a fair bit of annoyance.

"Yes, well…you know. I didn't want to interrupt you while you were enjoying yourself," she said hesitantly.

"I was not enjoying myself. What are you even thinking? And who is that girl anyway? She disappeared while I wasn't looking afterwards," said Akuto as he pressed the president for an answer.

The president's cheek twitched slightly and she placed a finger on the brim of her hat. Akuto did not understand what that action meant, but it clearly scared the three officers.

—Eh?

Akuto found it odd, but the president immediately removed her hand from her hat. She tapped the finger on her desk instead while her cheeks tightened in annoyance.

She said, "She may have been wearing one of our uniforms, but she is not a student. I cannot say anything more. There are certain things I am not allowed to say due to my position as student council president. But there is something I want to tell you. I'm not sure if I should call it a warning or a request, but do not let that girl do as she pleases. And try to have some sense. There are some truths that must not be brought to light."

Akuto couldn't understand the president or her attitude. But after being told so bluntly, he had no choice but to obey.

"Understood."

Even after Akuto left the student council office, the president's statement left him with feelings of suspicion.

—I need to make my preparations.

Akuto opened the knapsack he had borrowed from the school's travel supplies and then placed it on his dorm room floor, but the two people

standing on either side of the knapsack bothered him more than what he would put inside it.

He had not asked Korone or Hiroshi to come along. Korone was not a problem because she was his observer and could be reliable in a pinch. The problem was Hiroshi.

"I'll go with you, aniki! I'm prepared to give up my life if you're in danger!"

Hiroshi continued to expand on his determination at length, but Akuto calmly thought instead of listening to him.

—He's going to come with me no matter what I say, so telling him not to would be useless. But with that Teruya girl and everything else, there are just too many strange aspects to this. He might come in handy on that side of things, but I'm not sure I can protect him if we're confronted by the creature. He could easily get hurt in all this.

As Akuto thought on, he finally came to a decision.

"Could you fill this knapsack with some supplies? I have something else I need to take care of," he said.

Hiroshi seemed deeply moved that he was being relied on, so he ran to get food from the dining hall while half in tears.

—Now then…

After mustering up a small amount of courage, Akuto pulled out his student handbook and began a telepathic conversation.

Half an hour later, Akuto waited quietly in a room of the academy's underground labyrinth. He had been there once before. It was originally a bunker used for conducting strategies during the Great War. It was separated from Fujiko's secret lab by a single wall.

"You certainly have guts. How dare you show yourself before me?" said Fujiko as she appeared before Akuto with a look of displeasure.

"I would not have blamed you had you not come, so thank you for showing up."

Akuto stood up from his chair and bowed his head.

The memories of the incident from the other day had been erased from all of the other students, so only Akuto and Keena were aware of Fujiko's true

identity. And it was because Fujiko knew this fact that she had responded to his request.

"Are you planning to threaten me?"

"No, you would not give in to that anyway. Not to mention that nobody would believe me if I tried to reveal your intentions," replied Akuto immediately.

"Then what business do you have with me? I haven't given up on making you my slave," insisted Fujiko with a stiff expression.

However, Akuto simply answered honestly.

"I know. But I think we should have a more normal relationship. A relationship as upperclassman and underclassman."

"You know," Fujiko folded her arms in annoyance and looked down at Akuto. "I would prefer it if you did not view my ambitions as a black magician so lightly. To a black magician, the demon king is the symbol of liberation, but I intend to become someone even greater than the demon king."

"Then you have nothing to worry about because I have no intention of becoming the demon king."

That decisive statement left Fujiko looking disappointed.

"Wh-what do you mean? You saw through my plan and set up a trap for me…"

Instead of pointing out that it had been Keena's odd actions that had done that, Akuto simply stared Fujiko directly in the eye.

"Wh-what is it?" she asked.

"Senpai, I want you to teach me how to use magic in combat. I still lose control over my mana and do not know how to use it properly. And my official lessons are not enough for now."

Akuto spoke in a truly serious manner which left Fujiko shocked.

"So you came to me?"

"Yes. I thought the person I knew who is most used to fighting would be best."

Fujiko gave a cruel smile at that.

"I might lead you into a trap."

"I expect you to, but I still think learning from you would be best."

He was speaking from his heart, so his expression remained serious as he said that. Fujiko looked utterly confused.

"H-how softhearted can you be? Or are you trying to show off how good a person you are?"

"No, I'm not claiming to be anything. I do take my irritation out on others at times. However, I feel that I can trust you."

"That is what I am saying makes you softhearted."

"No, it doesn't. You're a terrible human being. You're selfish and you rely on and abuse power, yet you manipulate others to further your goals. That makes you paranoid. That's why you're hiding in fear."

"Wha-…?"

Fujiko was left speechless.

—Did I go too far? But I'm fairly certain all of this is true.

While silently regretting it, Akuto tried to fix things with his next words.

"As I said before, that is why I am able to trust you. After all, someone who never trusts others will always be working for their own self-interest. So as long as I give something in return, we can make a deal. As for what I will give you in exchange for being taught how to use magic, how about I promise not to make any sort of attack on you? With how much you like planning things out, I think you should find this reasonable."

As Akuto pressed Fujiko for an answer, she slammed her hands on the table in annoyance.

"Don't act like you know what goes on in my head!"

—She insists she is a villain, so I was trying to compliment her villainous side… Maybe I shouldn't have tried to get along with her after analyzing her to that extent.

Akuto folded his arms with a troubled look, but he knew that would never solve anything.

He bowed his head and said, "I apologize for being so rude. But I came here knowing the risks. And you want to make me your slave. This would make me your student, which is similar."

"D-don't say it like that!" shouted Fujiko in a shrill voice as she pounded on the table again. "Fine then! I will teach you what you want to know. I will teach you how to fight! But you cannot complain if I attack you in your sleep now! You are a demon! You are the demon king!"

—I got what I wanted, but it looks like I angered her.

Akuto shrugged.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"What!?"

"Um… Could you stop calling me the demon king?"

"No! You may not accept it, but you do have the potential!"

Fujiko pounded on the desk for a third time.

Part 4

Fujiko then told him to open his student handbook. He was to take notes in it.

"Magic refers to any phenomenon caused by the atmospheric mana reacting to your internal mana. You know that much, correct? Your internal mana reacts to the electrical impulses in your brain. That is simple as well. Now, it is the gods that decide how mana behaves. Energy is released into the earth from the central generation facility, so this is something other than energy. You could say this is like programming the mana."

Akuto knew that much, but the rest of what she said were things he only vaguely knew about.

"The gods decide how mana behaves. Mana appears to be almighty and that binds it. This causes a problem for the gods. The gods constantly monitor the contents of human brains via mana and log everything they see. That is the simplest way of explaining it. You can think of the gods as

computers or as personalities that become the target of worship. Because they monitor people's feelings, they can give different blessings to different people based on those peoples' individual actions. The logs themselves are not made public, but you could say they use the convenience of magic to force people into doing good. The god Ko Ro views charity as a virtue and the god Suhara views heroism as a virtue, so they make the magic required for such actions easier to use."

Normal people simply worshipped their god, but the upper levels of society had transformed it into a system. However, it was not hidden that this is what the gods were. It was simply that many people did not to want to consider it too much. Anyone related to academism knew this and most intellectuals chose to go through the motions of being religious despite knowing better. Doing so allowed them the convenience of magic, so it was well worth their while.

"That is why many graduates of this school ultimately hope to become priests that can influence the 'system' of the gods. And it is the black magicians that choose to oppose that system. In other words, we are opposed to being bound to it and want to restore free will. Or at least, that is the goal of the organized black magicians. It is true that there are many who are simply petty criminals."

Akuto cut in there.

"So how does a demon king fit into all of this?"

"You don't know despite being one yourself? Although I suppose no one would have told you. Every child born in this country is baptized, correct? That baptism is a contract with a god and one cannot use magic without it. However, those who are not baptized are not able to live as normal human beings. The previous demon king questioned that fact. This information is not exactly kept secret either. It just seems that no one cares."

"And how does this tie into using magic?"

"Certain types of magic require certain qualifications or else their use is considered a crime. However, this does not mean it is impossible for those without the qualifications to use them. For example, one normally needs a license to use flight magic, but it is taught to everyone in this academy. This type of magic is known as a forbidden spell. Even if you cannot use the spell without the qualifications, you can use it if you trick your god into thinking you are qualified. People who do that are known as black

magicians. However, the god still sees that you used the forbidden spell. You can trick your god into thinking you are qualified to use the forbidden spell, but your god will penalize you for it afterwards. In other words, the more often you use black magic, the weaker you become."

"Then is there any point in being a black magician?"

"Not if that was the only option. This is why black magicians had their own god. A god of freedom. A god that did not forbid anything."

"And where is this god?"

"It no longer exists. It was destroyed during the war. It is the dream of all black magicians to recreate it. That is why some black magicians are working to corrupt a high priest. Only a high priest and those around them have the knowledge needed to create a god."

"I see," Akuto nodded.

Fujiko had briefly covered what one would learn in first year lessons.

—But it sounds to me like the black magicians are being selfish too. If I think that differently from them, maybe I really will avoid being the demon king.

Fujiko then finally arrived at the true purpose of the lesson.

"Now, about fighting. I explained all of that because what types of magic you naturally specialize in come from which god's baptism you received and how your mind works."

Fujiko reached for Akuto's student handbook and drew a diagram. She drew four intersecting lines to create a star shape. It was a matrix with eight points at the end of the lines. And she wrote a word at each of the points like the numbers on a clock.

"Illusion", "Healing", "Telekinesis", "Explosion", "Spiritual", "Tool Control", "Religious", and "Transformation".

"These are the eight types of magic one can specialize in. As this diagram suggests, no one can specialize in two types opposite each other. Someone who specializes in illusion magic will have difficulty with spiritual magic. Using that knowledge is one trick to improving your abilities."

"What do you specialize in?"

"Transformation magic. I can change the composition of materials using mana. Those with this specialty can create potions and even change their shape. My specialty is more on the side of creating potions, though. What matters for now is that I have difficulty with explosion magic. We practice every sort of magic in our lessons, but it is best to avoid using your opposite type in a fight because it will be ineffective. You are obviously the opposite of me. You clearly specialize in explosion magic."

"That means I should focus on that, right?"

"Yes. Once we know that much, the next step would normally be practicing until you get the hang of it, but you don't have the time for that."

Fujiko placed a large handgun on the table.

Akuto looked at it in confusion.

"What is that?"

"It is an incantation gun which allows mana to be placed within the bullets. The mana is placed in the bullets ahead of time and the mana's effects show themselves once it is fired. Anyone can use the weapon, but someone who can control their mana well can produce many different effects by regulating the bullet ahead of time."

Fujiko lined up some bullets in front of Akuto.

"Do you always carry this around?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"For starters, I think it's illegal."

"Not in this academy. Everyone here can use magic even more dangerous than this."

Fujiko opened the revolver cylinder and showed him how to use it.

A gap appeared in the conversation there. Something that had been bothering Akuto floated up in the back of his mind.

"You are the dorm leader, right?"

"Yes."

"Then do you know a girl named Teruya Eiko?"

"No, I don't. …By any chance are you talking about the girl who was clinging to you at the morning assembly?" asked Fujiko as her expression stiffened.

"Do you know anything about her? The student council president said she didn't, but she seems to be hiding something. She even warned me to be careful around her."

A thoughtful expression came over Fujiko.

"That girl confronted me for some reason as well and it had been bothering me."

"Did she attack you?"

"No, she only confronted me. And the only thing I can think of that we have in common is the treasure map."

Fujiko had spoken that last statement while lost in thought, but she quickly silenced herself as if she had said too much. And Akuto didn't overlook it.

"What do you mean? Do you know something about the map?"

Fujiko's expression grew cloudy.

"N-no… I had only suspected that my late brother might have made it."

"Then…"

"I-I was wrong. My brother told me as much."

"Uh... I thought you said he was dead."

"I used necromancy. I'm a black magician, remember?"

Fujiko looked like she was only putting on a strong front as she said that. Her arrogant exterior had simply disappeared.

"If I recall, dead spirits created with necromancy can't lie. Sorry. It must have been hard on you to use necromancy to speak with your brother."

After seeing the look on Fujiko's face Akuto had tried to apologize, but she raised her voice as she grew a bit upset.

"Not at all! He was a horrible person! He disgraced my proud family! I have a lot of memories of him being with me when I was little, but that probably

means he was a filthy pedophile! If he were alive today, I am sure he would have become a lowly degenerate!"

—If you're worried about disgracing your family, why are you a black magician?

Akuto kept that thought to himself and chose to change the subject instead.

"Well, this Teruya Eiko bothers me. But I have problems with being forceful enough when it comes to girls…"

Fujiko stared at Akuto with resentment in her eyes.

"You were certainly forceful with me."

"Yeah, but you're evil. You can't exactly expect me to show you kindness," replied Akuto reflexively.

Fujiko held the incantation gun toward Akuto and spoke with her voice trembling.

"I hate those who oppose me and those who obey me are weak."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

Akuto respectfully took the incantation gun she was holding out.

Part 5

Akuto tried firing the incantation gun in the forest behind the school building and it seemed to be working well. He had placed steel cans at a distance as targets and he quickly figured out how to accurately blow them to smithereens. He could control the path of the bullets and the timing of the explosion with nothing but his own will, so it was quite easy to use. And unlike when he used his own magic, the power was restrained to a set range. Akuto was relieved to finally have a weapon he could control.

And it seemed Hiroshi had finished packing the supplies. The boy showed up behind the school building with a giant knapsack on his back. Korone was with him.

"Aniki! Just to be sure, I prepared enough supplies to last us an entire week!"

"Thanks… But you should have split the supplies into two bags."

"I can't make you carry the supplies, aniki! Just leave it to me!"

"You can carry everything if you want, but I don't want you to attempt too much and waste all of your effort because of it."

"Don't worry! I always waste all of my effort!"

"Oh, I see… Fine then. Now, let's get going," said Akuto.

But Korone cut in to say, "But it is the evening. I thought we were leaving in the morning."

"Let's get an early start. I want to leave while no one is watching. We can't let ourselves be spotted."

A voice from above responded to Akuto's statement.

"Who can you not let spot you, Sai Akuto!?"

Akuto looked up in shock to find Teruya Eiko standing in a tree. She didn't seem to mind that he could see her panties. In fact, she was puffing her chest out in pride while spreading her legs so he could get a better look.

"What are you…"

Before he could finish his question, Akuto noticed the panties quickly approaching him. Eiko had jumped down. She twisted her body around in midair to nicely land on Akuto's shoulders like he was giving her a piggyback ride.

"You promised to bring me with you!" shouted Eiko with an excited look.

"I don't remember promising anything."

"I'm coming with you even if you didn't promise anything. Got it?"

Eiko began rubbing her hips up against the back of Akuto's head.

"Hey…" Akuto started, but it was Hiroshi who began protesting in earnest.

"Get away from aniki, you whore!"

"Don't use such filthy language! And I'm free to climb up on his shoulders if I want to!"

"No, you are not! Aniki is mine!"

"Are you gay? Even if you are, he certainly isn't. Just look how red his face is. Look, look."

Eiko continued to grind her hips up against the back of Akuto's head.

His ears were trapped between her soft thighs and he could definitely feel his cheeks turning red.

"G-get off of me."

As usual, Akuto was still unable to use force at times like this. In the same way, Hiroshi continued to protest but never once touched Eiko.

"Please take me with you. Of course, I'll follow you even if you refuse."

"Not a chance!" shouted Hiroshi.

"But it might be dangerous," argued Akuto.

"C'mon!"

After they all argued back and forth for a few minutes, Korone suddenly spoke up.

"Arguing will not resolve anything. And the sun has already set. How about we camp here for tonight?"

And so they did.

—Wait a second. Why are we camping in the forest behind the school?

By the time Akuto realized that, he was already lying in his tent. Eiko had disappeared at some point, but she was clearly watching them. When he tried to sneak out of his tent and escape from her in the night, she had suddenly appeared from behind a tree.

—So she's monitoring us. She isn't an artificial human, so has she been trained in how to stay awake all night? Honestly, who is she?

Akuto eventually gave up and went to sleep.

Akuto woke Hiroshi very early the next morning to begin their journey (and because he would have felt like a complete idiot if any other students saw them camping in the forest right out back), but Junko was returning to the

academy at the same time. She came back after being summoned by her father.

Her father had told her that Teruya Eiko had infiltrated the school as an officially designated spy. He had no knowledge regarding her mission or who she was working for.

The Hattori and Teruya families had a long history. They both followed the Suhara religion, but they often came into conflict over differing interpretations of the religion's doctrines. The Hattori family had chosen to aid the peacetime government in national defense while the Teruya family saw that as weakness and viewed dedicating one's life to honing one's military might as a virtue.

—If one of them has infiltrated the school, their goal must be…

Junko naturally thought of Akuto. She had headed back to school even before the flying buses were running so that she could arrive at Akuto's dorm room window as quickly as possible. However, one glance was enough to tell her that Akuto was gone. The curtain was wide open and the bed was neatly made up.

"He's out? This early in the morning?"

Junko moved to the girls' dorm and knocked on Keena's door. She received no response, but Keena had not locked the door. She turned the knob and entered.

The room was filled with stuffed animals and empty bags of food and Keena was in a deep sleep.

部屋選び特権
米だらら
お百姓さんもビックリ!!

"I feel bad for doing this so early in the morning."

Junko shook Keena as she spoke in her sleep.

"I can't eat anymore Koshihikari…"

"What?"

"But I can still eat more Milky Queen."

"Wake up Keena!"

Junko shook her harder and Keena finally sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Is it morning all ready?"

"It's early. I'm sorry, but the situation is urgent. Where's Akuto?"

"Hm? A-chan left."

"Left where?"

"To go treasure hunting."

"What? Is he that foolish?" she replied due to her ignorance of the events that had transpired during previous days.

"No. It's real. A pirate's treasure is hidden somewhere in the academy. Only a truly courageous adventurer can get it."

"Enough!! Tell me the truth!"

"I am telling the truth. It must be Captain Kidd's treasure. It has been 50 years since it was said his grand voyage ended at this academy, but it still hasn't been found"

"This has always been a landlocked area!" shouted Junko.

She decided it had been a mistake to ask Keena, so she headed off to find someone more trustworthy to ask. However, she did not get any actual information until breakfast.

"That idiot went off on that treasure hunt to take responsibility."

"Yeah, with that weird girl. Not Keena, but that girl with the long green hair. I'd never seen her before. Is she really a student here? Or is she a graduate?"

"Does it matter? Though, they seemed really close."

"Yeah, after what they did at the morning assembly… Ha ha ha! Oh, it's hard to just out and say it."

"C'mon, say it. They did that!"

"And at the morning assembly. I still can't believe it!"

The girls did not hold back in their conversation with no guys present, but what they said was just too much for Junko. She almost passed out.

—What are you thinking, Akuto!? And don't tell me it's Eiko that you're with.

Junko then acquired a copy of the treasure map, made her preparations, and ignored the head public moral officer's ban as she headed out to secretly pursue Akuto. By the time she did, it was well past noon.

Chapter 3: The Three Keys

Part 1

All students who went treasure hunting had gone to the same place because the only location immediately identifiable on the treasure map was the underground crypt.

"So the other two marked locations cover too large an area?"

"That's right. This one is in the forest and this one is in the old city," explained Hiroshi while Akuto compared the treasure map with an aerial image of the academy grounds on his student handbook.

"I guess this crypt is large enough to know that's what it's pointing to. I just hope we don't have to search through the other two areas."

Akuto pointed at the location of the crypt. A small park was prepared aboveground. The park had an entrance leading underground that people used when performing a ceremony to mourn for those lost during the war.

"There's also this text."

<For Yamato Bouichirou.>

It was written in small letters below the mark on the map. The other two marked locations had nothing written next to them, so this was clearly the first location to investigate.

"Is this Yamato Bouichirou one of the soldiers who died in the war?"

"The crypt is filled with graves that contain funerary urns. If we can find his grave, it might hold some kind of clue," said Hiroshi.

Eiko began roaring with laughter at that.

"That's a stupid idea. You could figure it out if you gave it a little thought."

"We can't know until we check!" shouted back Hiroshi.

The two of them had been like this the entire time. It was giving Akuto a headache.

"But what if Bouichirou isn't dead?"

"Now you're sounding stupid. If we can't find this guy's ashes, we just have to assume the hint means something else."

Eiko and Hiroshi's argument was showing no sign of ending, so Akuto pointed forward.

"Look, I can see the park."

They arrived at their first destination just before noon.

They passed through the gate. It did not seem the park was regularly cleaned. Grass covered the brick path in places and tree branches stretched across everywhere, giving the place a gloomy atmosphere. There was a rest area made up of a bench underneath a roof, but they hesitated to use it with how long it had been since it was cleaned.

"It looks like they only clean the area in preparation for the ceremony," said Hiroshi.

"The war was over 100 years ago, so I don't really blame them," replied Akuto.

This time, Hiroshi pointed forward. He had spotted a building that was a bit tidier even if it had not been cleaned in a while either. The words "War Memorial Building" were carved on the side and a glance in the window showed it was filled with paintings, military uniforms, and other objects from the time of the war. It seemed to be cleaned at least once a year.

"The entrance to the crypt is in there," said Hiroshi because he had taken part in the ceremony in the past.

He took the lead and opened the door to the memorial building. He turned right directly upon entering the display room and continued straight until he reached a large door.

"There's a staircase behind this door."

"Then there might be immediate danger on the other side. We must take precaution."

Akuto told Hiroshi to leave their supplies here and was about to tell Eiko to wait with them, but she grabbed onto his arm before he could.

"I'm going with you, obviously."

This made it difficult for Akuto to argue with her.

"Fine, but at least stop clinging to me. There is a good chance that this place is dangerous."

—I can't simply let this girl put herself in harm's way, but it looks like I don't have much of a choice.

Still uneasy, Akuto stuck his hand in his pocket and grabbed the grip of his incantation gun. He used the other to open the door.

The staircase leading underground was wide enough for five or six people to walk side by side and it had lights installed at set intervals. It felt less like heading underground than the path to the underground labyrinth in the school. But they continued down a long time, so Akuto guessed the crypt had to be quite a ways underground.

At the bottom of the stairs was a vast space. It looked as large as a stadium. The ceiling was very high up. A five story building would probably have fit inside the room. Lights were installed on the ceiling, but they were not bright enough to fully light up the ground. The other end of the space was too dim to see well. The floor looked like an artificial lawn. Small square boxes were systematically lined up to fill the space. That was all that occupied the area. As they walked across the grid-shaped artificial lawn running between the boxes, it became clear those boxes were plastic gravestones. Each of them was only 30 cm square, meaning many the dead had been put to rest here. Each gravestone had a name carved into it. They seemed to be organized in gojuuon order.

"There are a lot of them, but we should be able to find the name we want right here."

With that comment, Akuto began to search for the family name "Yamato". The vowel row was near the entrance, so the "Y" row would be near the opposite side.

"If confrontation truly is inevitable, I suppose it would be further down."

Akuto began walking with Eiko and Hiroshi following behind. As they moved further in, they began to notice stains and scars on the floor that had not been visible from the entrance. Some conflict had clearly taken place here. A few scraps of bloody cloth had fallen to the floor in places.

"Its such a shame that this place was violated. Doesn't anyone respect the dead anymore?" muttered Akuto, but Eiko cried out in utter surprise.

"Ehhhh!? What do you mean? You're the demon king! Why are you talking about respect as if you care?"

"I am not and never will be the damned Demon King," he replied immediately and Eiko shook her head.

"You can't possibly be this dull. Why do you insist on taking everything in the least interesting direction?"

"I don't like living only for the present like that."

Akuto also didn't like being criticized so coldly.

"If you insist on behaving this way, I will be forced to withdraw my love for you. I might just end up betraying you!"

Eiko hopped in front of Akuto, spun around, and stretched her mouth out as if sulking. The gesture was so childish yet so serious that Akuto was left bewildered.

—Betray me? But she was never even on my side in the first place. In fact, I get the feeling she's been manipulating me from the very beginning. What am I supposed to do about her?

"Why are you so concerned about what I do?" he asked.

Eiko suddenly grew angry and said, "Because I'm in love with you!"

"Now, wait just a second. We barely know each other."

This sudden and unexpected declaration of her so-called love was shocking in the very least.

"That's right! We first met during that morning assembly! What's your point? Haven't you ever heard of love at first sight!?"

"That may be, but you're going about it the wrong way"

"You can't be worried about whether something is right or wrong! Why do you insist on that?"

"Because I believe it's important to always work towards ensuring peace. This is wrong because it's inappropriate," said Akuto in full diligence mode.

This irritated Eiko even further and she began making a fuss like a child.

"You don't get it! I came here because I heard you were the Demon King! Why do you have to be such a goody two-shoes!?" cried Eiko, but Akuto did not respond.

He had spotted a shadow moving behind Eiko.

"Look out! Behind you!" warned Hiroshi as he pointed behind Eiko, but Eiko's excitement did not die down.

"Are you sure you don't want me on your side? I want to dedicate my life to a true man and I am saying that I've taken a liking to you!"

"We can discuss this later."

Akuto held up his incantation gun.

A human-shaped shadow was approaching from behind Eiko. Its slender form moved slowly. That was all he could tell.

"Don't move or I'll shoot," he warned.

The shadow immediately accelerated, so he fired the incantation gun.

A dry sound rang out as he fired it. He controlled the bullet to pursue the shadow as it attempted to evade. As soon as the bullet approached the shadow, it detonated at a level regulated to blow the creature away.

A ball of light the size of a basketball swelled out. Even if the pressure was only enough to knock a human back, the impact of a direct hit would have been too much to withstand.

But the shadow scattered in the center of the glowing orb. Once the ball disappeared, a definite hole could be seen right there. It was as if the ball had struck some soft object and pierced straight through it. However, that hole was quickly filled in. The shadow seemed to be made up of many small particles and Akuto got the feeling it could freely change its shape no matter what was sent against it.

—This is exactly what the other students were talking about. I had hoped I could scatter it with that blast.

Akuto loaded the next bullet as he tried to come up with a plan, but then Eiko cut between him and the shadow.

"Get the hell out of the way!"

Eiko quickly pulled a short sword from within her uniform. She held it backhandedly and spun around to slice horizontally.

Just like with the explosion, the shadow was sliced apart but regenerated as soon as it jumped back.

Akuto was more amazed by Eiko's actions than by the shadow's regeneration.

—She's clearly no ordinary human.

But even so, he could not allow her to remain on the front line. He hesitated over whether he should instruct her to fall back, but ultimately decided she wouldn't listen to him even if he did. Instead, he moved forward.

He could see the main body of the shadow. It was slender and wearing all black. He couldn't tell if it was male or female. Its face was covered by a white mask, but it looked human. As Akuto approached, it spoke.

"Leave and never return. If you do not heed my warning, I cannot guarantee your survival."

"I'm glad that we can communicate. And I was actually just thinking the same thing."

Akuto truly meant what he said and the shadow's shoulders seemed to droop in disappointment upon stating his intensions.

"Then leave and never return to this-…"

The shadow trailed off as he was interrupted by a sudden shout.

"Kiiiaahhhh!"

Eiko jumped up and sliced her short sword down toward the top of the shadow's head.

Akuto thought the shadow's mask would be broken, but then even the mask transformed into fog. Was the mask part of the shadow's body, could it actually turn nearby objects into that fog as well, or was this nothing more than an illusion?

—Overthinking it isn't going to give me any answers. I have to stop her.

"Stop! Fall back!"

"No!"

Eiko ignored Akuto's instructions and continued to slash at the shadow. This did not seem to have any effect, but the shadow fell back as if Eiko's slashes were hurting it. It may have been exhausting to turn its body into that fog.

—That means it isn't an illusion. Can it turn itself and any nearby objects into this fog and then reconstruct them? If so, this spell must be draining its mana.

Akuto decided that that was the only conclution.

—And once the shadow tires itself out, it will be forced to rely on offence!

"I said fall back!" repeated Akuto, but unsurprisingly, Eiko did not do as he said.

"Why are you giving me orders!? I'll never follow the orders of someone I don't love!"

—What is with this girl!?

And then Akuto's fears came true.

The shadow extended an arm-like appendage which transformed into fog. In the next instant, it reformed in the shape of a sharp silver blade. The change had been so unexpected that Eiko was unable to react in time. She could not fully evade the stabbing strike from the newly formed blade.

"Kyaaah!"

Eiko was knocked back and collapsed to the floor. It seemed she had managed to hold up her short sword and block the blow, but a line of red had appeared on her arm.

"I warned you and your companions, girl," said the shadow in a low voice as it seemed to glide toward Eiko.

It continued its assault on Eiko with the blade.

Eiko rolled to the side and blocked with her short sword to somehow manage to survive.

—If it has to solidify in order to strike…!

Akuto repeatedly tried to fire a bullet at the exact instant the shadow attacked Eiko, but the shadow would either turn a portion of its body into fog to neutralize the bullet or it would quickly deflect it with the blade.

Akuto then chose another bullet and quickly loaded the gun. This bullet had magic that would cause a small tornado.

He fired the bullet as the shadow attempted to attack Eiko yet again. The shadow assumed the bullet would have the same effect as before, so it tried to avoid it by turning into a fog. However, the bullet caused a whirlwind that enveloped the fog making up the shadow's body. Akuto used his power to increase the intensity of the whirlwind. It instantly grew into a small tornado twice as tall and blew the shadow away.

—It isn't all that powerful, but it's pretty useful if you can control it.

Akuto ran over to Eiko.

"Are you okay?"

He held a hand out toward her where she lay collapsed on the ground, but he regretted it an instant later. Eiko looked up at him with a flush on her cheeks. Akuto recalled seeing a few girls looking at him this way back in his middle school days. And the situation had never turned out well.

—What am I supposed to do? I don't know why, but girls like her always get really angry or start crying when I try to explain the situation and fix the misunderstanding.

"You saved me!" shouted Eiko in excitement.

"I would have done the same thing for anyone in your position."

Akuto tried to draw back his extended hand, but Eiko grabbed onto it before he could.

"Don't be shy. You need to be more honest!"

Eiko seemed to be in a very good mood.

Akuto averted his gaze and called out to Korone who had been watching from behind the entire time.

"Hey, can you heal her?"

But Korone silently pointed behind Akuto.

"?"

He looked over and found the shadow reforming. Akuto could somehow tell that the shadow was angry. He could not tell if this was due to this enemy having human emotions or if he was simply reading human emotions where there were none.

—We're in trouble if it attacks us more actively.

Akuto loaded another tornado bullet, but the shadow didn't approach or withdraw. It merely stood at a distance and slowly spread its arms.

Akuto had a bad feeling that turned out to be justified.

He heard the sound of wings flapping coming from above.

He looked up to find what looked like a black cloud floating up near the ceiling.

The cloud was writhing around while producing the low rumbling noise of countless bird or insects wings.

"You have got to be kidding me," groaned Akuto.

He had once seen a flock of birds migrating. That flock had been in the hundreds. He didn't know if these were birds or insects, but this flock or swarm was just as large despite being in an enclosed underground area.

Akuto learned anew just what kind of monster the other students had almost died fighting. This flock or swarm was obviously being controlled by the shadow.

"Run!" Akuto shouted to Eiko.

But Eiko remained stubborn.

"No! My Akuto is not the kind of person who runs away!"

Eiko held up her short sword backhandedly. She intended to continue fighting the shadow.

—Why is she so obsessed?

Eiko seemed more stubborn than insane to Akuto. He had sensed that there was more to this incident than met the eye, but it seemed Eiko knew something he didn't. However, he didn't have the time to think it over.

The dark cloud lowered from above. It was a swarm of bats. Those black and ominous animals cut across his field of vision again and again. The sounds of their screeching and wings flapping filled the entire chamber.

Akuto repeatedly fired his incantation gun, but no matter how much he controlled the trajectory and the explosion, he could only ever shoot down one or two at a time. And he was attacked from his blind spots all the while.

"Shit."

The scratches themselves were light. However, the number of scratches was ridiculous. His clothes were ripped and blood began seeping from his torn skin. If this continued for too long, mutilation was inevitable.

Eiko and Hiroshi were in the same situation. Eiko was accurately cutting down the bats that flew in front of her, but she couldn't keep up with their numbers. Meanwhile, Hiroshi could only curl up in a ball.

"Korone!" shouted Akuto.

"Yes? Please do not ask me to save you. This situation is obviously your own fault, so saving you would not align with my mission to observe whether you are becoming the Demon King and to distance you from unnecessary harm," calmly replied Korone.

She alone stood still in an area beyond where the bats were swarming.

"Yeah, whatever! Just take Hiroshi and get the hell out of here!"

"That I can do."

Korone began rummaging around in her bag. She pulled out shoes with small tires attached and put them on her feet after holding them up in the air for some reason. They were basically roller blades, but they seemed to be powered in some way. Korone accelerated at a tremendous rate while still crouched down. She arrived at Hiroshi's side in an instant, roughly grabbed at his collar, made a splendid 180 that left behind the smell of burning tires, and shot away in another instant. It all took only a few seconds.

—I should probably acknowledge her skills there, so why don't I feel any desire to do so?

After ensuring Korone had escaped to safety, Akuto turned back toward the shadow. He was almost certain that it was controlling the bats. Each and every one of the bats was artificial. That was obvious enough from the corpses left behind when he shot them down. They moved based on a simple system, but it would have been difficult for someone to take control of them. It may have been appropriate to say the shadow had tamed them. And the shadow had likely created all of them as well. If this shadow was human, he or she had tremendous talent. This would not be an easily defeated opponent.

But Akuto understood that it wouldn't do any good if they ran away. He also felt it was intentionally avoiding any fatal blows. Even so, it was still mercilessly attacking Eiko who stubbornly refused to fall back. The situation was only escalating. As time passed, the number of small cuts and scrapes on Eiko continued to grow. It was possible she would eventually run out of strength.

"There's no other way. I really am hopeless," complained Akuto.

A bad habit of his was how he thought so calmly at times like this.

He had thought up a way of resolving the situation. The worst part was that he felt he might actually be able to do it.

In the end, he was forced to follow the pace Eiko had set. She was trying to accomplish something and was willing to risk her life to do so. He didn't know if it was based on her expectations for him or on the size of her objective, but he felt like he would have to find the treasure now.

Of course, it was still too dangerous to simply do what Eiko wanted. She was clearly plotting something. However, he would prefer to know why he was being used and then choose his own path than to be used without ever learning the reason.

Akuto shouted toward the shadow.

"Sorry, but I changed my mind! I've decided to find what it is you're protecting! I'll try not to harm you too seriously, so please don't hold it against me!"

The shadow looked surprised at that announcement and the concentration of bats around Akuto suddenly increased. However, Akuto remained calm.

—I can use this.

Akuto pulled out one of the wind-producing rounds he had used before. He used his fingers to break off the actual bullet on the tip of the cartridge. He activated the magical signal stored inside which created a small whirlwind in his hand.

—I could control the wind when I fired it. But my mana is so unstable that I can't control mana when it's anywhere near me. In that case…

Akuto prepared himself and then strengthened the whirlwind in his hand.

The noise of the wind grew so loud it sounded like an explosion. It was as if a typhoon had suddenly materialize. The violently whirling wind spread out around Akuto.

All of the bats were swallowed by the wind. The artificial lawn on the floor was ripped to shreads and thrown through the air. The plastic gravestones were blown to dust and the funerary urns within came out and scattered their ashes everywhere.

"Eeee!"

The shadow let out a human shriek.

The wind spread out in a bowl shape with Akuto in the center. Akuto could obviously not control it anymore and it rampaged through everything in the chamber. The wind roared as it swept across every nook and cranny of the room. Whether fog or not, the shadow was swallowed and blown about.

—That should be enough.

With that thought, Akuto tried to suppress the mana, but he quickly realized he had failed. Amid the roar of the wind, he heard a loud and odd cracking noise. He looked up to find cracks spreading through the ceiling. Before he could even react, the ceiling began to cave in.

A great roar and tremor shook the earth. Stones and the items stored in the memorial building fell down and were thrown about by the wind.

After a while longer, Akuto finally succeeded in suppressing the wind. However, the War Memorial Building had been utterly destroyed at that point. Akuto and Eiko, who had collapsed next to him, were unscathed due to being at the center of the wind, but they were surrounded by nothing but rubble lying in a spiral. The ceiling had completely disintegrated and the midday sky was crystal clear.

—I thought I could do it, but this isn't what I hoped.

Akuto regretted his actions, but it was too late now.

However, Eiko got up next to him and spoke, delighted.

"Wow! That was amazing! You really did it!"

"I'm not proud of what I've done. What's so damn enjoyable about destruction?" replied Akuto in displeasure.

"It's just fun. Do you really need a reason for it to be fun?"

A smile surfaced on Eiko's bloodied face and it seemed she did not care about her own injuries.

"Anyway, why did you lead me here in the first place?" asked Akuto in all seriousness because this was no joking matter.

Eiko began to reply while still smiling, but Akuto's serious expression did not crumble. She ultimately dropped the smile before speaking.

"What do you mean?" she asked sulkily.

"I know that you're hiding something from me."

"Well, yeah. But I think this will all be for your benefit."

"That doesn't matter. You want me to go on this treasure hunt no matter what. Up until now, I thought it might be a joke, but you were willing to risk your life for this. What is this treasure?"

When Akuto asked that, Eiko fell silent and looked away.

But then Eiko curled up on the ground. It seemed her injures were too much for her after all.

Akuto silently placed a hand on her. He attempted to heal her like that first year did in the dining hall before. He was only imitating someone else's actions, but he didn't lose control over his mana. Healing probably didn't fall under the category of magic he specialized in, but it still worked well enough.

Eiko looked surprised at the healing, but then she suddenly spoke to Akuto.

"Hey, if I tell you, will you like me?"

"Maybe if you decide to make some changes," he replied while monitoring the progress of the healing.

Eiko's face lit up.

"No worries there. I already am decent."

"No, you're not," he replied immediately.

Eiko's face clouded over and she said, "Then I just have to become decent from now on, right?"

"That's right," agreed Akuto.

After checking on her cuts one last time, he removed his hand from her. Eiko looked disappointed, but she began speaking indifferently about something very frightening while checking on her condition.

"The treasure is the property of the previous Demon King."

"What? Where did you hear that?"

Even Akuto was shocked to hear his response.

"I can't tell you. But I want you to become a man by acquiring it."

"Acquiring one of the Demon King's possessions wouldn't make me a man. That's ridiculous. Are you a black magician or something?

"Please don't compare me to them. I don't think as formally as those people."

"Then why?"

"It's your destiny. That's what it all comes down to."

"My destiny?"

"Yes. Someone I have sworn loyalty to said so. Between you and he, one of you will be destroyed and the other will hold the fate of the world in your hands."

"I've had enough of your stupid jokes."

"This is no joke. He's never been wrong as far as I know. And he's a lot like you. That is why I fell in love with you."

"I understand. So to sum it up, someone somewhere might think something about me," said Akuto in annoyance.

Eiko snorted like a spoiled child.

"I'm being serious, you jerk."

"If you are being serious, why are you weighing two different people against each other? And if I really am destined to have this thing, why do you bother doing anything?"

Eiko's expression suddenly darkened.

"Guys that do not understand how a girl's heart works are just pathetic."

"I know. It seems that I have bad luck with girls."

Akuto began walking tiptoed along the piles of rubble in order to avoid this conversation. Nevertheless, Eiko followed and continued speaking.

"Hey, do you want me to tell you?"

"Don't bother. Now that I know the circumstances, you're nothing but a nuisance."

"Don't be mean."

As Eiko spoke sulkily, Akuto spotted something at his feet.

"Yamato Bouichirou…"

He found a plate engraved with that name. As soon as he said the name, he realized he shouldn't have, but it was too late. Eiko crouched down at his feet.

"It's in here, isn't!?"

Eiko had already opened the gravestone the plate was attached to.

It didn't contain a funerary urn. Instead, it contained an old character doll. It was small enough to fit in someone's palm.

"A doll?"

Eiko picked it up and it seemed to actually be a keychain in the shape of the character rather than a doll.

"There has to be a button on the back."

Eiko turned it round and pressed the button. The doll's back had a small speaker hole. A voice played from it.

<Go to the shelf in the back of the knight equipment lab… Once you gather all three, play this message…>

That much was understandable, but the recording was followed by something like high-pitched static. Eiko handed the keychain to Akuto.

"This is a recorder keychain for children, but what was that last noise?"

"Part of the language used to program artificial intelligences. Any intelligent magician can produce the noise with their voice."

That explanation had suddenly come from behind Akuto. He turned around to find Korone.

"Don't scare me like that."

"I found it difficult to escape when the ceiling suddenly collapsed. Was that your doing?"

"Well…uh… That was self defense," replied Akuto. He then began talking about the keychain to avoid further questions. "So someone recorded this and hid it here."

"That is obvious. I will accept that this was self defense, but the other students are sure to assume you were desecrating the remains of those who died in the war."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to agree with you."

—It's only a matter of time.

Akuto looked up into the sky with no clue of what to do next.

Part 2

Fujiko was watching the goings on in the crypt using the crystal ball in her lab. She was utterly dumbfounded at what she saw.

—That keychain!

The footage was looking down on Akuto and the others from above. Fujiko had embedded a tracking device in the incantation gun she had given Akuto. She had then sent out a Monitor, a small flying relay device that would follow that signal.

"I can't believe it… But he can't talk his way out of this one!"

Fujiko picked up the glass container holding her brother's head and showed him the footage in the crystal ball.

"You speak of me 'talking my way out of' this, but I really have no memory of it. However, I do know that keychain is mine. I would often leave messages using it. Mother said you liked it better when I used that instead of a video letter when I was away from the house for extended periods of time."

"Don't you dare lie to me! If you know that much, how can you have no memory of leaving that message? Are even your memories fabricated? I never missed you when you were away! I know that quite well now!"

Fujiko disheveled her hair as she shouted in confusion. Her brother frowned, but only attempted to comfort her.

"Please don't be upset, Fujiko. This is my fault."

"How can you say that so lightly!?"

"Because as a spirit, I can only answer you honestly," he said.

"That's not what I mean! Can't you see how upset I am? If your past wasn't what I have always believed it was, then what I have always believed is-…!"

"Don't cry, Fujiko."

"But this means you were not a weak and pathetic coward who shamelessly abandoned his duty. If you set all this up, then…"

"Fujiko, I was weak and pathetic and I did shamelessly abandon my duty."

"That's enough! How can I know for certain who the real-…"

"Kyaaah!"

Fujiko heard a scream and something crashing down behind her. She turned around in surprise to find Keena buried under books that had fallen from the shelf.

"Soga Keena!" shouted Fujiko.

"Eh heh heh heh…" laughed Keena.

"How did you get in here!? How long have you been watching me!?"

Keena jumped in fright when Fujiko raised her voice, but tears quickly filled her eyes and she kneeled before Fujiko with her hands clasped in supplication.

"I'm sorry! My rice ball fell down a hole and rolled away! I ended up here as I chased after it! I wasn't trying to intrude."

Fujiko scratched at her head in annoyance.

"Honestly… you're such a bad liar."

But then Fujiko spotted a dirty rice ball out of the corner of her eye. It was covered in so much dust it must have rolled down the stairs on the way here. After seeing it, Fujiko felt that being angered any further would make her look foolish.

"Fine. Come to think of it, you already knew about this place. Just leave as soon as possible. I'm very busy."

As Fujiko made a shooing motion, Keena quickly latched onto the crystal ball.

"Hey, It's A-chan! Hi, A-chan!"

"Stop that! Get away from there!"

"Hey, onee-sama!" said Keena as she suddenly looked up at Fujiko.

"Wh-what is it? And did you just call me onee-sama?"

"Please let me call you onee-sama! Oh, and it may be rude to bring it up now, but I've been wanting to apologize for the other day!"

Keena had an oddly serious look in her eyes and Fujiko was swallowed up by her pace.

"Huh?"

"I don't expect you to forgive me! But please at least leave A-chan out of this! You must still hold a grudge if you're watching him here."

"W-well, yes. Of course I do."

"Okay! You may not be able to forgive him either, but A-chan didn't mean any harm. Now how about we go help!?"

"Help him?"

Fujiko had not even considered that possibility.

"That's right! Let's go, onee-sama!" repeated Keena.

None of it made any sense, but it was enough to surprise Fujiko. She had surely wanted to go herself and having Keena beg her to do so made it easier.

"Fine. If you insist," said Fujiko quietly.

Keena gave a clap of delight and said, "Yay! Then let's make our preparations right away! We'll need rice and outdoor cooking equipment! Wait for me by the confession tree in the forest out back! Now you might learn the truth about your brother!"

—Eh? Wait a second.

Fujiko tried to ask what Keena meant by that, but the girl had already left the room.

Part 3

"I already decided that I'm going. I'll return to the school and report to the student council."

Akuto was insistent. He spoke firmly to Eiko while he drank tea from a kettle on the portable stove. They had already pitched the tents for the night.

Eiko didn't seem to have given up, but when he went as far as to threaten her, she fell silent and sulked.

The area had grown dark and it was just about time to sleep. Akuto called Korone over and asked her to watch over Eiko the entire night before he crawled into his own tent. They had three one-person tents set up. One for Akuto, one for Hiroshi, and one for Korone and Eiko.

—I always have trouble with girls like her.

Sleep fell on him while he silently complained.

But when he woke up the following morning, he realized the camp site was oddly silent. He left his tent and found Hiroshi's tent gone.

—Don't tell me...!

He entered Eiko's tent and found Korone in a pose as if in an embrace. However, she was all alone and frozen in place. She looked like a surreal sculpture.

"Dammit! She got away."

Korone had clearly been deactivated. Eiko must have convinced Korone to embrace her and then pulled the artificial human's switch.

To ensure Korone didn't fall over when she was activated, he embraced her, reached a hand into her skirt, and groped about for her tail.

—This is always so embarrassing.

While trying to touch her soft rear end as little as possible, he stretched his hand toward her waist and grabbed her round tail. He pulled it and light returned to her eyes with a slight humming noise.

"Now, hurry! Give me the special ningyou-yaki…huh? Where is Teruya Eiko?" said Korone in surprise despite showing no emotion.

"You were deactivated."

"That is a problem. And I take it this means you did not use magic to switch places with her and play with my body."

"That's not funny. Why would you even consider that?"

Akuto moved away from Korone.

"Then where is she?"

Korone looked around the tent. A letter had been left on top of a small knapsack. Akuto picked it up and found it was from Hiroshi.

<Aniki, I've realized you only said you would be returning as a test to those around you. We'll find the treasure on our own.>

Akuto held his head in his hands.

"That bitch! She tricked him."

"Such a fool," declared Korone.

This was no different from taking a hostage. Akuto opened the small knapsack to find enough food and water for him. He put the bag on his back, left the tent, and began folding it.

"Will you follow them?" asked Korone.

Akuto nodded, "I don't have a choice. The next destination is the knight equipment lab. Do you know where it is?"

"It is listed in some old records."

"Then let's go."

Akuto began walking. The others likely had a lead of several hours and their pace would likely be similar, so he and Korone would arrive exactly that much after them.

"There'll probably be someone else protecting the treasure."

"I know."

"It seems that girl really wants me to become the Demon King. She said that it was my destiny."

"She is forcing the hopes of those around you onto you."

"Please, enough with the jokes."

He had assumed it was a joke because Korone had spoken the same as always, but she denied it.

"No, this is not a joke. That is one type of hope people have."

"But I don't want to be the Demon King."

"This has nothing to do with what you want. That is merely a matter of yourself."

"Don't make it any more complicated than it already is. I want to bring peace to the world and I think I'm currently doing well as far as I'm concerned."

"Many people believe that, but it does not always work out so well. That is what it is to be human. We artificial humans envy that of you."

"You envy the fact that things don't always work out the way we want?"

"Yes."

"Hmm…"

After that, the two of them walked silently for a long while. After they left the unmaintained mountain path, an abandoned city finally came into view. It had been left as is after it had been burned down in the war. Akuto had never seen an entire ruined city before, it was almost too eerie.

"Why did they just leave the city like this?"

"Because of a lack of budget. It is on the academy's grounds, so any repairs or demolitions would have to be paid for out of the school's budget."

"Oh. So it was just abandoned."

Akuto began walking along the city's central street. The war was most definitely the cause of this mass destruction, and he was relieved not to find any traces of the dead.

"Two military forces clashed here after the residents were evacuated," explained Korone. "The Demon King's troops targeted the city because of

the knight's laboratory, so the knights evacuated the residents and fought using the building we are headed to as their base."

"I see," replied Akuto just as he heard a rumbling noise and felt the earth tremble as if from an earthquake. "Looks like my hunch was right."

Akuto placed his bag on the ground and began running. Korone followed and continued with her explanations.

"As you have likely guessed, that noise came from the direction of the knight equipment laboratory."

"Yeah, I figure as much."

He turned the corner and found himself on a major road. In the center of the plaza visible up ahead, he saw a five-story building that had half-crumbled. It was an old building made of the concrete that was considered very valuable in modern times. The roof over the entrance had collapsed and a large entrance hall could be seen beyond it. A monster stood there.

—You have got to be kidding me.

What Akuto saw was a metal giant. This humanoid figure was covered in gigantic armor, looked to be about thirty meters tall, and was moving. He saw light occasionally run across the surface of its body, but it was only after hearing Eiko's cries that he realized these were caused by the giant being attacked.

"Kiaah!"

Her battle cry was accompanied by a metallic clang and sparks flying from the armor's surface. Eiko could be seen flitting across in front of the giant each time. She was jumping around it while attacking with her short sword.

—That isn't working at all.

Akuto couldn't help but be dumbfounded by this sight. He couldn't come up with any way of resolving the situation, but he had to save her nonetheless.

"What am I supposed to do against a monster like that?" he complained to no one in particular while holding up his incantation gun.

When he did, the giant suddenly stopped moving.

—Eh?

Akuto found it hard to believe the giant had heard him, but it had obviously noticed him. The giant turned around and began walking toward the collapsed entrance. The entrance was too small for its large body, so the giant walked out as if spreading the entrance with its shoulders. It continued walking while ignoring the concrete fragments falling on it and the cloud of dust spreading out.

Akuto was terrified of the giant causing the earth to shake with each step.

It was thirty meters tall and fully armored. The gauntlet on its right hand was unusually large and held an axe just as long as a human being.

—Oh my God! I can't stand up to that behemoth! But if I can at least stop it temporarily, the others can use the chance to escape!

Akuto fired his incantation gun. He was of course aiming for the gaps in the armor. The area behind the knees contained a space to allow the giant to move. The area behind the giant's face guard was too dark to see what was inside, but attacking the back of the knee would cause decent damage whether it was a human or machine inside.

He controlled the bullet to hit the giant directly in the back of the knee. But just before it hit, the giant twisted its knee around to stop the bullet on the front knee plate.

"!"

Akuto was shocked that a giant like that could move quickly and subtly enough to block the bullet at the last second like that.

—Is it even possible for something this huge to have such remarkable agility?

He also realized he had heard some kind of quiet muttering. It was going to be harder to bring down this giant's defenses than he thought.

"Kiaaahh!!" shouted Eiko once more.

She jumped from the building and slashed at the giant from behind. However, the giant didn't overlook this attack. Eiko had been targeting a gap in the armor, but the giant superbly altered where the attack landed.

The giant then swung its axe as if irritated. Eiko easily avoided it by jumping back. It seemed the giant couldn't exhibit the same subtlety in its attacks. It swung its axe toward Eiko again and again, but the girl jumped around and avoided every strike.

Eiko only focused on evasion and it seemed that she didn't even consider retreating. Akuto began thinking about the possibility of knocking her unconscious and carrying her away, but that idea quickly became meaningless.

Someone else dashed out from within the building.

It was Hiroshi. Akuto couldn't imagine what he was thinking, but Hiroshi held one of the electromagnetic batons modern knights often used. He was attempting to bludgeon the giant into submission.

"Ahhhhh!"

—Oh, come on. What the hell is he thinking?

While trying to figure out what to do, Akuto fired his gun repeatedly to draw the giant's attention.

Whether the giant found the bullets to be a nuisance or it didn't even consider Hiroshi a threat, it turned toward Akuto just as he planned.

But then the giant began walking toward him and quickly picked up speed. Akuto considered fleeing, but he couldn't run fast enough to escape from the speed that giant's huge legs gave it. Now it was Akuto who was cornered.

—Are you freaking kidding me!?

The giant approached before his eyes. Akuto panicked as he thought of a plan. The giant used an axe. Eiko had easily evaded it, but the axe was only slow when it came to aiming. That blade was too large to avoid just by moving aside slightly after the giant had started to swing it down with a great roar. When it came down to it, Akuto didn't have the speed necessary to avoid it.

—In that case…

Akuto loaded his incantation gun with the strongest explosion round he had. If he controlled the mana to draw out the most powerful explosion he could, he guessed he would be able to blow away the giant.

He held up the incantation gun. He didn't bother aiming. The giant would just move its armor in the way regardless.

Without slowing down from its run, the giant swung up its axe. This caused a violent slashing sound.

—!

Akuto pulled the trigger.

This round was meant to be used only in fights at school. However, Akuto filled it with atmospheric mana the instant it hit. The explosion spread out several dozen times larger than normal.

With a tremendous boom, a sphere of light swelled out on the giant's chest.

That light continued to expand and consumed the giant.

The shockwave spread out and a wave of vibration shook the entire abandoned city for an instant.

While contemplating the time he had blown up the classroom, Akuto had investigated the pressure of the explosion he had created. The answer had been 5-7 kilograms per square centimeter. Without some kind of defense, the pressure of the explosion was enough to nearly kill someone. Even if the explosion had scattered due to being in midair, taking that to the chest should have at least knocked the giant to the ground.

—What the hell!?

Akuto was left speechless.

When the orb of light disappeared, the giant stood there unscathed. The only change was the smoke floating up from the heated metal of its armor.

"This is so not good."

Akuto panicked.

The giant had already swung its axe up once more.

He had lost his chance to escape.

The axe roared as it was swung down. Its trajectory was headed straight toward Akuto.

That roaring axe struck Akuto.

And when the steel struck flesh, the sound of blood gushing could be heard.

"Aniki!" shouted Hiroshi as he ran up behind the giant.

"Kyaah!" screamed Eiko as she looked up at the giant's back.

But…

—Oh, I get it. So that's it. There are things I naturally specialize in and things I don't. I should have listened more closely to what senpai said.

Akuto had come to a new understanding of what that meant.

He had thrown the incantation gun to his feet. He had then stopped the human-sized axe with his bare hands. He held his palms together above his forehead with the blade caught between them.

—Dammit. I'm the rational type, so no one would think I specialize in brute force like this.

The muscles of Akuto's arms had swollen up so it was noticeable even through his clothes. He had pumped mana into his muscles. That had multiplied his strength several times over.

—And unlike with other magic, I can actually tell I have complete control over this power!

Akuto looked up.

The giant was obviously confused. It was violently swaying back and forth as it tried to either push or pull the axe. No matter how much stronger Akuto had become, his actual weight hadn't changed. In other words, the giant should have only needed the power to lift up his body weight. However, Akuto had dug his feet into the ground and was using his now superhuman leg strength to grab hold of the earth between his feet.

"Please don't resist," said Akuto as he twisted the axe.

The giant tried to twist the axe back, creating a comparison between their strength.

However, the competition ended quickly. The giant refused to let go of the axe, so the twisting of the weapon wrenched its arms around and caused its entire body to fall to the side.

This caused a giant tremor to run through the earth. Hiroshi and other things lying on the ground were sent up into the air for an instant.

Akuto took the axe away from the giant. He tossed it up into the air, let it rotate around, and caught it by the handle. He then easily swung it around.

The giant didn't speak, but it crawled away from Akuto, stood up, and walked away with its back to Akuto and the others. It seemed less that it was fleeing and more that it had graciously accepted its defeat.

—Why are the guardians of the treasure so different from each other?

It bothered Akuto, but his thoughts were cut off when Hiroshi ran over to his side.

"That was so awesome! I should've known you'd do something like this!"

Akuto tossed the axe aside and felt the need to lecture Hiroshi.

"This is not the time for acknowledgement. I thought I made it clear that I wanted you to get to safety."

Hiroshi didn't seem to understand gravity of the situation.

"Eh? I just thought I needed to grow stronger since I'm your first follower!"

—Why the hell is he upset?

Akuto felt this was unreasonable, but he decided not to say anything as it didn't seem Hiroshi was all that angry.

"Fine, but I don't really get the importance of being strong," he said with a shrug.

He then looked around for Eiko. She was looking at him with an even more excitedly than Hiroshi.

"You really came through!"

Akuto ignored Eiko as she ran over. He walked right past her and toward the laboratory.

"You're going to get me involved no matter what I do. In that case, I'll see this through to the end. But keep in mind that I won't forgive you for endangering my friend."

"Drop the act! You can't possibly be this good of a person!"

Eiko spoke ill of him in her anger.

—This is why I can't stand this crazy bitch.

He set foot inside the half-crumbled laboratory. He was slightly interested in what they had been studying here, but everything had been cleared out. He went around to each room off the main hall, but they were all empty. The only thing remaining was in the room farthest back.

—Come to think of it, the keychain only mentioned the shelf in the back.

The room had nothing but empty steel shelves for documents. He opened all of the drawers to the shelves, only to find a memo pad-sized plate. He picked it up to find it was an old electronic toy. It could display the photos taken with it and could be drawn on with the attached pen.

—Another toy?

Akuto was overcome by an odd sensation as he activated the plate. It displayed a cave entrance surrounded by trees.

Something had been written on the border of the photo of the cave.

<Check the shrine within. Once you have all three, use this plate to photograph your palm for authorization.>

Akuto put the plate in his pocket.

—Why do I have a bad feeling about this? I seriously doubt this is just a treasure hunt.

"I've found underground water!" announced Korone as she held up two bent metal rods she had taken from her bag. "I can measure the flow of the underground water now."

Korone held one of the rods in each hand and walked ahead of the others. The metal rods wavered back and forth, but they stuck to a specific direction after she had walked a certain distance. She insisted the device detected mana, but Akuto couldn't help but be skeptical.

"We've been wandering through the forest for a while now. Are you sure this is working?" asked Akuto worriedly, but Korone nodded.

"There are no complications. We only need to follow the flow of the underground water."

None of them had recognized the location in the photograph, but Hiroshi had speculated it was the limestone cave rumored to exist deep within the forest.

"Limestone caves can't form without underground water, so we'll find the cave if we follow the underground water in the marked location on the map until it reaches the surface," assured Hiroshi.

"Why are there rumors about this limestone cave?"

"They say it has a hot spring. Some of the people who enter the cave find the hot spring and others don't, so it's known as the phantom hot spring."

"Couldn't the people who found it show people where it was? Or is it just in too inconvenient a location to want to come back?"

"It must be. But there aren't any rumors of monsters. The forest might actually be more dangerous."

"You say there are no monsters, but there has to be a guardian."

"Aniki, what is it?"

"Think about it. It doesn't make sense for this cave to have had a guardian all this time."

"I see… Then did the guardian only appear when the map was found?"

Hiroshi looked troubled.

"Either way, the situation has escalated without my involvement, but the students will think of some reason to blame me."

As Akuto complained, Korone looked up and said, "Ah."

"What is it?"

"I have found it."

Korone pointed toward the exact scene shown in the photograph. It was a cave entrance buried in trees.

"I never thought you would actually find it," said Akuto without thinking.

Korone held the metal rods up in front of Akuto's face.

"These rods are highly trusted magical tools that are used even when laying pipes."

"Oh, I get it," replied Akuto as he put down his bag.

He called Hiroshi over and had him conjure up light for them. He then looked over toward Eiko. Unsurprisingly, she obviously intended to go in with him. Akuto had given up on trying to stop her.

"Let's go."

He then took the lead as they walked into the limestone cave. The entrance was small enough that he had to crouch, but the ceiling rose up soon afterwards. The stone beneath his feet was damp and slippery. It was very humid and water seemed to be flowing within.

"That's an interesting sight," said Hiroshi in admiration.

He was illuminating a tunnel just large enough for a bus to pass through. The walls were glittering. Water running through the ceiling trailed down the walls. Pieces of rock that had fallen from the eroding ceiling had gathered below.

"Is this the only path?"

As they continued on, the path seemed to head down. They saw a dark hole up ahead that the light didn't reach. When they arrived, they found it led to a large cavern.

Hiroshi amplified the light so they could see the entire cavern. It was about the size of a school gym. Stalactites hung down from the ceiling like icicles and stalagmites both large and small rose up from the floor like anthills. Further in, they could see circular indentations in the rock. They were filled with water. This created a row of several small pools.

They walked around to the walls of the hall. They had several indentations, but no holes leading out. It seemed this hall was the end of the cave.

—Are we really at a dead end? We still haven't found the shrine. Wait a minute. These pools might be deeper than they look. They might lead further in.

Akuto walked up to the side of the pool furthest back and crouched down. As expected, the wall that had appeared to be a dead end had a hole in it leaving a space of several dozen centimeters above the water's surface. They could head further in by passing through the pool.

Akuto placed a hand in the pool. It was warm. Just as the rumors said, it was a hot spring.

"It looks like we have no choice but to swim," said Akuto, but Hiroshi was too frightened.

"I'm afraid to go in there."

"You're right. It's dangerous. Okay, you can wait here with Korone."

Akuto stripped down to his boxers and took the orb of light from Hiroshi. If he said anything unnecessary here, Hiroshi might obstinately insist on "getting stronger" again, so he entered the pool without saying anything more. The water was surprisingly shallow. He had to crouch down and crawl with only his head above water. The hole didn't go very far. After only a few meters, the ceiling opened up again and he found himself in a different cavern.

It was much larger than the previous one and light came in through the ceiling. It seemed the ceiling here had completely eroded because he could see a portion of the forest through it.

A portion of the hot spring Akuto was soaking in was made of limestone, but it changed to rougher rock up ahead. Past that point, it looked more like the standard forest hot spring. Several different hot springs were divided by areas of rock. Animals likely soothed their injuries in it too.

—This place is really relaxing. But this is no time to be taking it easy.

With that thought, Akuto stood up to search for the shrine where the treasure was hidden, but then someone grabbed onto him from behind.

"Aah!"

However, Akuto hadn't let his guard down too much. It was only Eiko who assaulted him. While Eiko was apparently skilled at spying, it had more to do with Akuto not wanting to pay any attention to her.

Akuto felt her soft breasts pressed against his back. He had no shirt on, so he could feel skin sticking to skin on his back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?"

Akuto tried to run away, but she was holding onto him from behind.

"We're finally alone. How about we have some fun?"

Eiko had her arms firmly wrapped around Akuto's body. She gradually pulled Akuto into the water like a ghost dragging down a victim.

"Let go of me!"

"No. If I let go, you'll run away."

"Of course I will! You're freaking naked!"

"No one goes into a hot spring wearing their clothes."

"Did you strip down back in the other cavern to pursue me?"

"I'm quick, so the others didn't notice. I've been waiting for a chance like this," she said in a bewitching voice.

"A chance to do what? Kill me?"

"No! You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that I love you? And that means it's only natural for me to pursue you so violently."

Eiko pressed her body up against Akuto, grabbed his hand from behind, and guided it toward her own body.

"Wh-what are you doing?" he asked nervously.

"Don't make me spell it out for you," said Eiko as she pressed his hand against her breast.

Akuto's fingers stiffened and Eiko gradually brought his hand lower. His hand slid down to her stomach and then even lower…

Part 4

—I need to train more often.

Junko finally became keenly aware of that fact. She had tracked Akuto and his team from the underground crypt to the deserted city, but she lost their trail once they entered the forest.

—A top-level spy should be able to do this with ease. Was I so filled with impure thoughts that I rushed things?

The "impure thoughts" Junko mentioned were her imaginings concerning whether Akuto and the mysterious girl with him were doing anything indecent. She did fine while focusing on tracking them, but her mind would quickly wander. When those impure thoughts made their way to the surface, she would shout out despite being all alone. She would then look around to make sure no one heard her.

—Get a hold of yourself, Junko. If this girl really is Teruya Eiko, he might be in danger.

"But now I've lost track of them."

Junko was wandering through the forest. Just as she thought about leaving altogether to pick up the trail from the beginning once more, she found a spring welling up within the forest. She stuck her finger in it to see if it was drinkable and found it was reasonably warm.

—Come to think of it, I haven't had a chance to bathe for three days now. Maybe I should take some time to relax.

She put down her things, examined her surroundings, and then stripped off her clothes. She folded them, placed them on her head, placed her sheathed sword on top like a lid, and tied it all on to her head using the cord on the scabbard known as the sageo. This was a habit of hers that allowed her to react if attacked when she bathed.

After once again checking that no one was watching, she stretched her naked body and stepped into the bath.

"Ahh" she sighed, flushed while rubbing against herself.

—I'm pretty durable thanks to my martial arts training. I wonder if he prefers squishier breasts like Keena's…

After thinking that, she frantically shook her head.

—No, no, no. What am I saying? Constant training is my family's duty to keep others from saying we have grown weak after choosing government over war!

"But…"

Junko brought her chin and mouth under the water and blew bubbles, but then she sensed someone's presence. She silently brought her mouth out of the water and searched for this presence while still crouched down.

She then heard someone yell in surprise followed by splashing.

—There are two of them.

Junko sneaked over toward the sounds. It was on the other side of a large boulder. She could hear someone's voice.

"We're finally alone. How about we have some fun?"

—Wha-!?

The tone to that voice suggested that this was sexual foreplay between a boy and a girl.

—Maybe I should just leave.

Junko prepared to leave as her face reddened for a reason other than the water, but her curiosity got better of her.

"Let go of me."

"No. If I let go, you'll run away."

"Of course I will. You're naked."

—I recognize that diligent but blunt voice!

Junko was shocked when she heard that familiar voice so clearly. She drew her sword and stuck it out beyond the boulder so she could use it as a mirror to watch on.

—!

Akuto was naked and a girl was embracing him from behind. Akuto struggled, but the girl rubbed her body against him more violently.

Junko was overwhelmed by the embarrassment, confusion, and anger. She reversed the wrist of the hand holding the drawn sword to raise the blade and jumped into the air in an instant.

"Yaaaaaaaahhh!"

Part 5

Akuto could have stopped Eiko if he tried, but he knew he had issues with restraint. If he wasn't careful, he would end up blasting Eiko across the cavern. But when he calmed, he realized he would be worse off if he put Eiko in an even worse mood.

—On the bright side, I might be able to draw out some useful information if I go along with this… then again, I'm not exactly experienced in seduction, so I'm not sure I would be able to keep my cool. And I certainly can't take it all the way.

Akuto ultimately refused to let Eiko lead his hand any further and left it pressed up against her belly. He had to find a way to prolong the conversation.

"Wait a second. You act as if you would choose between me and your current master."

"What's wrong with choosing both?"

"I don't think I would be comfortable with that."

"Try to have an open mind."

"I don't think so. You see, I'm interested in what kind of a person this other man is."

Akuto viewed this as an attempt to look good while going along with Eiko's pace, but she latched onto it.

"Oh, I understand where you're coming from there. He-…"

Eiko trailed off because of a voice coming from above.

"Yaaaaaaaahhh!"

Akuto looked up.

Junko was falling down from above while naked and with her clothes on top of her head. Her legs were spread wide as she held her sword up above her head.

"Wait! What are you doing!?" shouted Akuto without thinking.

His comment appeared to have finally reminded Junko of her nudity.

"H-hyaaaah!"

She skillfully folded her arms and legs to ball up in midair and then landed right next to Akuto and Eiko. With a loud splash, a pillar of water shot up. Akuto and Eiko moved away from each other to put some distance between them and Junko.

"H-Hattori-san… what are you doing here?" asked Akuto.

Junko stuck just her head and sword out from the wave she had created. Her face was flushed a brilliant red, but her tone was very sharp.

"Akuto, you can't trust her! She's an official spy!"

"Officially designated?"

Akuto looked over at Eiko. She stood tall without even trying to cover up. Akuto looked away and she laughed.

"That's right. You had your suspicions, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't have guessed you were officially designated. That means you work for the government. So is some VIP from the government involved in all this?"

"That's right! He wants to know if you really are a man who will stand up to destiny. And he sent me to hasten the process. You're standing at a dangerous crossroad. If I don't do something about it, you might die the instant you acquire the treasure."

"Die?"

"Yes. You need the proper qualifications, but as far as I can see, you lack those at the moment."

"I refuse to take this test, so there's no point."

"Okay, I'll simplify it: choose me. If you love me, I will make a man of you," declared Eiko.

Junko then cut in, "Wait! I don't know what you're talking about, Teruya, but I do know that you're working for the Imperial Public Safety Committee! That's the supervising organization for the knights, but it's also a radical faction in favor of subjugating black magicians!"

This revelation only angered Eiko.

"I'm sick of being called a radical! If we allowed anyone to use magic freely, the entire empire would crumble! Why can't you understand that!?"

Junko angrily responded, "That's what we call being radical! The Teruya family always takes things to such extremes! You're in no position to talk after passing down nothing but assassination techniques!"

"The Hattori family has grown weak and forgotten how to fight after working for the Imperial Ministry!"

"Silence! If you were following the government's laws, you would only be observing Sai Akuto. Why are you interfering and trying to lead him to the demon king's possession!?"

"The Public Safety Committee follows the law! And my dear Akuto has come all this way of his own free will!"

"Then leave! Stay away from him!" shouted Junko.

Eiko then relaxed.

"Ohhh, so that's it. In that case…" Eiko once more pressed herself against Akuto. "So, who will it be my darling, me or her?"

"What?"

Akuto was unsure of what to say.

"We work only for our master. Junko may be loyal to you now, but if you accept me and reject her, she loses all right to complain no matter what we do."

Eiko brought her lips right up to Akuto's ear, but intentionally spoke loud enough for Junko to hear. Akuto felt that did not quite make sense, but it seemed that was how it worked with spies. One look at Junko was enough to tell him she at least accepted it as true. She bit her lip in frustration and stared at Akuto.

—I'm not entirely sure what the hell is going on, but I can't exactly choose Junko. She's so easy to anger and she would never accept me as her master.

Akuto was troubled, but Junko didn't wait for his answer. She cried out to focus herself and attacked Eiko.

"Enough! This is between the two of us!"

Junko jumped up from the water, but Eiko turned Akuto's head in her direction.

"No!"

Junko sank back down into the water.

When Akuto realized she couldn't come out of the water because she was bothered by him seeing her, he hesitantly spoke up.

"I-it's okay. I'm not looking, so go nuts."

"You liar! You were obviously looking at me! And what do you mean 'go nuts'!? Are you expecting some kind of show!?"

"Is this really the time!?"

"Why don't you just get out of here!?"

"Oh, you're right. Sorry. Wait! I can't move!" yelled Akuto when he noticed a certain fact.

However, both Junko and Eiko weren't listening.

"This is a perfect opportunity! We can deal with our years of resentment!"

Eiko moved gracefully toward Junko. Junko tried to fight back, but she couldn't move at full speed while also covering herself. Her sword was knocked from her hand by Eiko in no time at all.

"Oh, crap!"

"Ah ha ha! It must be tough being so pure!" shouted Eiko as her body wavered.

Suddenly, two copies of Eiko appeared on either side of her. This was the same technique Junko excelled at.

"If you lose your shame, you won't be considered a lady anymore!"

Junko created copies of her own. Several Eikos and Junkos shouted at each other as they fought.

"I taught you that technique when we were young children!"

"I don't remember it that way! It's the standard technique of our village!"

"I did it because our master was angry with you!"

"He was only angry because you mixed poison in his food and made it look like I did it!"

"Shut up, you virgin!"

"You shut up, you slut!"

It was nothing more than a pathetic, childish argument, but when it included several versions of both participants leaping around a hot spring, Akuto wasn't able to move. And even if Junko was doing a splendid job of hiding her important parts with her arms and legs, he still had trouble finding anywhere to look when these two naked girls were cutting across in front of him while fighting.

However, when Akuto claimed to not be able to move, he was concerned with something else.

A pair of eyes had been glaring his way for a while now. They weren't human. And they were looking down from within a tree. Akuto wasn't sure of whether the eyes were canine or feline, but they appeared to be wild.

They were the eyes of a giant wolf. It didn't appear to have been simply altered by exposure to mana. When Akuto tried to manipulate the mana within the beast, he felt a power resisting him.

—So this is what is protecting this place. It doesn't seem to have a human will like the others, though.

The other guardians had had distinct personalities, but this one was wild. And on top of that, Akuto did not know how this opponent would attack.

Junko and Eiko had not noticed it, so they continued to fight evenly. However, it did seem Junko was being pushed back slightly.

—What should I do?

Akuto kept an eye on the beast while glancing around the area. He spotted a small shrine below the beast. He had not noticed it before because it was buried in leaves.

—So it'll attack anyone who approaches that shrine.

As soon as Akuto realized that, one pair of Junkos and Eikos began to approach the shrine as they battled.

"Not good!"

Akuto ran forward. He had seen the beast begin to move out of the corner of his eye. He ran in between that Junko and Eiko.

"What are you doing!?"

"Out of the way!"

The two girls shouted, but they could not continue speaking for long. A beast twice the size of a human jumped down toward Akuto.

Akuto received the body blow and tossed the beast behind him. The beast seemed to have quite a bit of physical strength, but it was not enough to match Akuto. However, the beast spun around in midair and landed safely on a rock. It had not taken any damage.

"A wolf?" said Junko.

"This is dangerous, so get ba-…"

The beast did not even give Akuto the chance to finish speaking. Almost as soon as it landed, it leaped once more and aimed for Akuto's face with its claws.

"Oh."

Akuto somehow managed to avoid the attack, but the beast landed on another rock and immediately jumped back toward Akuto.

He was unable to avoid this strike. A piece of the skin on his shoulder was ripped away.

"Uuh…!"

Akuto held his shoulder and curled up, but the beast did not give him the chance to see how much damage had been done. It moved on to its next attack with the same tempo as before. It leaped a third time with its claws extended.

And then every single copy of Junko and Eiko attacked the beast from every direction.

"Yaaahhh!"

"Kiaaahhh!"

Copy after copy rained down on the beast from the left and right, but they all landed after losing sight of their target.

"?"

Puzzled looks appeared on several faces. And then they were all blown away. The beast stood right in front of Akuto.

The beast had slipped past every single copy's attack and then destroyed almost every single one of them in an instant. Junko and Eiko had used up most of their energy, so they sank down exhausted on either side of Akuto. Any damage to their copies was sent back to their bodies by sapping their energy. They were both utterly exhausted.

—We might seriously be in trouble this time.

In all seriousness, Akuto prepared for his death. The previous guardians had avoided any fatal attacks in order to simply drive them away, but this one was completely wild. It did not seem to hold back at all. If it had not been for that first attack, Akuto might have been able to summon up all of his power to punch the beast just as it struck him, but he could not manage that now that he had been injured.

The beast made another leap.

Junko and Eiko drew in close to him in fear.

Akuto covered his face. He reflexively threw his body over the two girls to protect them.

He clenched his teeth to endure the coming pain of the beast's claws tearing through his body.

But…

Nothing happened.

He only heard a splash from directly in front of him.

He cautiously opened his eyes to find the beast floating in the water. It seemed to be asleep.

—Well, it looks like we were saved.

Akuto slowly stood up while still hesitating to believe this was real. He then realized he held Junko in his arms. She was trembling and desperately clinging to him.

"Hey," he called out and she opened her eyes.

After looking back and forth between Akuto and the floating beast, her entire body relaxed.

"Th-thank goodness…"

As she relaxed, she leaned up against Akuto's body.

"H-hey, wait…"

Akuto panicked and Junko finally realized what she was doing. She let out a meaningless scream, jumped back, and sank into the hot spring.

"So that's it," said an irritated voice.

It was Eiko. She was standing up from where she had been curled up a bit away from Akuto's back.

"Actions taken in reflex don't lie! Junko! It looks like Sai Akuto has chosen you!" declared Eiko. Then an evil smile appeared on her face as her anger-filled voice continued. "In that case, you can die for all I care! I hope you find this relic and then die because of it!"

Eiko walked through the hot spring and toward the shrine. She stuck her hand into it, pulled something out, and tossed it toward Akuto.

Akuto reflexively caught it. It was a key that fit in his palm.

—A key?

He was confused, but Eiko wordlessly threw herself back into the hot spring. She swam through the water and began to return to the hall she and Akuto had come from.

—Dammit. What is going on?

Akuto complained silently before he finally began feeling the pain in his shoulder.

"Ow, ow, ow."

When he held his shoulder and curled up, Junko approached.

"Are you okay?"

"It's not going to kill me," replied Akuto as he looked away from Junko. "Sorry that this has gotten so weird."

Junko blushed at his apology and shook her head.

"I-I do not mind. If only I had realized she was coming here sooner… No, wait. I did not notice because I was holed up in my room and I was holed up in my room because you stripped me naked in the middle of class!"

Junko's tone changed to that of a cross-examining attorney as she spoke.

"Sorry. You're right," Akuto readily admitted. But then he replied with a question that suddenly came to him. "Do you have a long history with that girl?"

"As I am sure you could gather, we have always been rivals. She never thinks about anything but her feelings in the moment."

"I noticed that," agreed Akuto and Junko looked shocked.

"What happened between you two!? No, wait. I don't mean it like that…"

"Don't worry. She was only a nuisance."

"That is good. She is the type who will change the way she lives her life for a guy. And she is wrong down to the fundamental level of thinking she has to serve someone. So…um…that talk about you being my master was

nothing but her delusion. Also, she said you chose me, but that is not what happened, right?"

Junko continued speaking while completely flustered.

Akuto thought for a moment before replying.

"Actually, if I had to choose, I would go with you. But…"

Junko did not hear anything he said beyond "but". She was in such a state of confusion that she shook her hands around, sending water splashing everywhere.

Also, Akuto was unable to continue speaking because he heard a foolish-sounding voice from above.

"A-chaaan! Junko-chaaan!"

It was Keena.

Akuto looked up to find Keena flying down from the sky. She was positioned as if lying face down but had her arms and legs dangling limply below her. Surprisingly, Fujiko was sitting sideways on her back.

"Why are you spending so long talking without wondering why that beast fell asleep!? And what were you going to do had I not come? Also, you lost that gun on your way here, didn't you? It was not easy finding you!"

Fujiko was toying with a medicine bottle in her hand. It seemed she had scattered some sort of drug from the air to put the animal to sleep.

"A-chan, you're injured!"

Keena floated down toward Akuto.

"I'm fine. I just need to get Korone to treat it and then I have to put on my clothes. Um, and so does Hattori-san."

"Y-you do not need to point that out!" shouted back Junko.

Chapter 4: The Student Council President's Rage

Part 1

After Akuto was healed, they all gathered in the forest without knowing what to do. No one understood the situation. According to Korone and Hiroshi, Eiko had returned, put on her clothes, and then left in anger. That left no one who knew the whole story. They were having trouble discussing the issue. Akuto insisted they should return to the academy while Fujiko insisted they should activate the keys here. The others were unsure who was right. Out of all of them, only Keena remained cheerful. She looked like she was having a picnic.

However, Fujiko seemed to be acting oddly to Akuto.

"So that's the current state of things."

As Akuto explained the situation, Fujiko was fidgeting restlessly and biting her nails. Once he finished his explanation, she spoke up.

"Can I see those keys?"

Akuto did not want her taking any unnecessary actions, but then he recalled a certain fact.

—Come to think of it, this is somehow related to her brother.

He did not have a particularly logical reason, but he did feel a bit sorry for Fujiko. And so he lined the three keys up in front of her.

The first was a keychain shaped like a person that could record audio.

The second was a memo pad-sized plate that could take photos and be drawn on.

The third was an object that looked exactly like a key to a door.

Fujiko placed them in her hand, brought them up to her face one at a time, and carefully scrutinized them.

She no longer had the look of the perfect high-class girl or the look of the evil queen. She looked like nothing more than a girl desperately trying to search her memory.

"Are these yours, senpai?" asked Akuto.

Fujiko did not reply, but the familiar way with which she held the keychain and plate gave a tacit affirmation.

"You said your brother was a horrible person, but what did he do?"

When he changed the question, Fujiko shook her head.

"I do not know. However, I feel as if I must learn the truth."

Saying that, Fujiko toyed with the third key that did not seem to be hers. When she twisted the head of the key, it made a clicking noise.

The key then emitted a roar followed by a light.

"This is-…!"

They all looked at the key.

It began drawing a magic circle about 5 meters across in the air around them.

"This is a teleportation magic circle," said Korone.

Keena looked puzzled and asked, "What does that mean?"

"Anyone within the circle who wishes for it shall be transported to a preset location. Space is twisted to open a hole that the target individual is dropped through. The target individual is not broken down and transmitted, so it is the safer variety of teleportation," explained Korone.

"Anyone who wishes for it? Then…"

Akuto began to speak his fear, but his fear came true in the next instant.

Fujiko disappeared. And she was still holding all three keys.

"W-wait! What happens if the keys disappear?" frantically asked Akuto.

"Do not worry. For safety purposes, the magic circle will not immediately disappear. It will disappear in about a minute and it can be used to travel until then."

"Then do we need to decide whether to follow her within the next minute?"

"Yes. However, there will be no problem if we are inside the magic circle when it disappears. We will simply be left here."

—I get it.

Akuto resolved himself. He looked at the others and saw only looks of people intent on sticking with this to the end. Once he mentally gave his intent to transport, his body suddenly seemed to grow lighter. In the next instant, he felt like he was falling. It seemed he really did fall. He felt like he had fallen atop stone pavement from a bit off the ground. He braced himself and found himself in an unfamiliar place.

He looked around. It was an underground area even larger than the crypt. He was only guessing that it was underground, but he saw no chance of that being wrong with how distant the ceiling was above him. The area was tall enough for an entire building to fit inside. It was large in the other two dimensions as well. He thought an entire city might fit inside.

And a gate was located just in front of where Akuto and the others had appeared.

—A palace?

Akuto was at a loss for words. The others seemed shocked into speechlessness as well. The splendid gates before them were ornamented with gold. Akuto and the others seemed to be standing next to a wall. That wall had a giant gate. Beyond the gate was a stone-paved path about 100 meters long with an altar at the end.

"There's an altar there," said Akuto before a figure appeared in front of the gate.

This figure stood imposingly in their way as if to keep them from passing through the gate. The figure was not all that tall but was oddly intimidating.

"Hi there, hi there," said the figure while lifting up the brim of her hat slightly.

"The student council president…" they all said in surprise.

"This is the goal. It was a fun game, wasn't it?"

The president smiled and the three officers appeared from behind her. One slender girl was dressed all in black, one tall girl removed her three-meter-tall armor, and one muscular girl looked sleepy and still had the arms and legs of a beast.

—These three… The thought had crossed my mind, but I never thought it would be true.

Akuto carefully observed the three officers.

There was no mistaking it. The three monsters protecting the treasures had definitely been them.

"A game?" said Junko in displeasure.

"Ah ha ha ha," laughed the president. "Yes. This was a piece of entertainment put on by the student council. It was a treasure hunting game. Did you enjoy it? The prize is…let's see. How about a kiss on the cheek from me?"

The president smiled at that, but she and Keena, who was shouting "Yay! A kiss, a kiss!", were the only two smiling. The three officers stared spitefully at Akuto. When she noticed this, the president turned toward the three of them.

"C'mon, I'm doing my best here! Smile! Smile! Get them excited!"

"Ah…ah ha ha ha ha!"

"Don don pafu pafu!"

"This is so much fun, gya! That's the president for you! She's a genius at hosting games, gya!"

The three officers forced themselves to laugh, but this excited only Keena.

"There is no way that is what this is. Can you please explain what is going on?" asked Junko.

"Like I said: it's a game. I made sure that map was found, sent the three officers out to get in the way, and will award the first person to arrive here."

The president's smile disappeared.

"I refuse to believe that," insisted Junko, but Akuto tried to hold her back.

"No, this is fine. And it was a fun game, right?"

When Akuto agreed with her, the president's forced smile returned.

"Yes, yes. Right? It was fun, right? Ah ha ha ha ha."

"Ah ha ha ha."

Akuto laughed stiffly back.

But those laughs changed to dry sounds of shock. Fujiko, who had silently held the keys up to this point, suddenly began running.

"I must pass through here!" shouted Fujiko.

She pulled a medicine bottle out of her pocket and threw it to the ground where the student council president stood. Smoke shot up and robbed everyone of their vision in no time.

"Oh, no!" shouted the president in panic.

Fujiko leapt into the smoke. The three officers tried to stop her, but she slipped through the gate before they could.

They next thing they knew, Fujiko was running along the stone-paved path to the altar.

"Senpai!"

Akuto tried to pursue her, but the president's sharp voice stopped him.

"Stop! It's too dangerous!"

The unusual tone to her voice stopped Akuto. He turned to look at her.

"This is no game, is it?"

"You all already knew that. I do thank you for attempting to read the atmosphere, though. Anyway, this is obviously no game."

The president shook her head in resignation.

"Is that a possession of the old demon king up ahead?"

"Yes. This is the lowest level of the academy's underground labyrinth. The final battle was fought underground and this was the demon king's base."

"Why is it still here?"

"You will understand before long. But let me tell you one thing: do not pass through this gate."

The president stared at Akuto as she spoke. Her gaze was filled with an odd intensity.

However, Akuto was not about to fall back so easily.

"Why?" he asked while staring her right back in the eye.

Hiroshi and even Junko instinctually stepped away from the two of them.

"Because. No matter what happens now, do not move from that spot. You passing through that gate would not be good for anyone involved."

The president spoke in a quiet but grave voice.

Part 2

Fujiko had realized that the faint light coming from the key was pointing towards the altar. And she was certain this light would reveal her past. She believed this would solve all of the contradictions she had felt for so long.

She ran across the stone pavement. No one followed her. As she approached the altar, her pace slowed and she checked on the keychain and plate.

—I need to confirm my palm with the plate and play that voice with the keychain. This altar must have some magical system built in and that is the process to open it.

She searched the altar. It was made of metal and the size of a double bed, so it looked like a platform for human sacrifices. It had writing carved into it in a relief.

<The seal shall remain until one qualified to save all of mankind appears. The unqualified shall receive death.>

A keyhole was located to the side of that writing and Fujiko had a feeling the key she held would fit.

"I have to use this…"

She inserted the key. A low rumbling could be heard. She quickly realized that the altar itself had activated.

The plate in her hand lit up. It was only a toy, but it had the ability to detect mana communications. After receiving the signal, it displayed <Scan your

palm.> She took a photograph of her own palm and sent it back. A reply immediately came. <Orally input the encoded password.> She pressed the keychain's button. Her brother's voice played, followed by the vocalized password.

Hearing the nostalgic sound of her brother's voice brought tears to her eyes. Those tears fell to the altar just as the altar began to rise up.

<Password accepted. Restarting system.>

When Fujiko heard that voice play, she moved away from the altar.

As it rose, it opened up by unraveling like a box made of interwoven wood. A hole leading underground then opened. That hole spread until it covered the entire pedestal of the altar.

Finally, a silver cylinder rose up from the hole.

It was ten meters across and stopped when it was sticking up to a height of about five meters.

A crack then appeared across the side of the cylinder. The cylinder began to slowly open to the left and right.

"What is going to happen?" cut in Akuto.

Behind the student council president, a silver cylinder was rising up beyond the stone-paved path.

"Well, you have committed a crime that you must pay for," said the president while shaking her head regrettably.

"A crime?"

"You dug this up. We tried to stop you. You understand that, right?"

"I do. You did not want anyone to find this. I understand that now."

"What I wanted was to maintain the status quo. Or perhaps I should say to preserve it. At any rate, the government wanted to pretend this did not exist."

"Because it belonged to the demon king?"

"Yes. We of course work for the government. We are studying to one day become bureaucrats. And once you become the student council president,

you are already working for the government. However, the government is not one solid entity. We are from the main faction that wishes to leave the relics of the demon king be. We do not know what would happen if we destroyed them and it could cause great destruction if it was learned how to use them. Not even the black magicians wish to touch these relics of the demon king. In most cases, it seems certain qualifications are needed to use them and we do not know what those are. If you carelessly approach them, you will die."

The president explained all this indifferently, but her words made Akuto gasp.

"Die!?"

"Yes. Etou Fujiko-kun may be done for. However, letting this happen is the punishment you must face. I do not know how close the two of you were, but remember that this sacrifice is your fault."

"I was led here by Teruya Eiko…" said Akuto before falling silent in the most unsightly fashion.

However, the president did not overlook this.

"Pathetic. She was most likely working for the radicals in the government. They wish to purge all of the black magicians. They even wish to start a war to do so. This may have been part of their preparations toward that end. Or they may have known you did not possess the qualifications and were therefore luring you to your death. At any rate, I do not know what exactly those creepy people are plotting, but they will undoubtedly go farther than the main faction of the government."

"Understood. So you are asking me to stay here and watch?"

"Yes. Do not think of trying to save her. This relic of the demon king will do nothing more than kill the unqualified person. It will not leave that territory," explained the president.

But that did not sit well with Akuto.

"How can you know that?"

"After the demon king lost the war 100 years ago, the black magicians sealed his possessions in various places. A few of those relics have since been found. Both the black magicians and the government have tried to activate them. A few skilled people found the means of activating them and

they proved it at the cost of their lives. And this is the most recently discovered relic."

"Then her older brother was…"

"So it seems. We do not know the details either, but we simply want to let this relic rest in peace. You gave us the map and we located it here. In other words, we succeeded in the treasure hunt much more quickly than you did. When we asked the government whether we should dispose of it or not, they told us to preserve its current state. Thinking back, there may have been some deals and arguments between the main faction and radical faction at the time. But I will obey my orders regardless."

The president raised a finger and drew an imaginary line in front of the gate.

"I will show no mercy if you cross this line."

The silver cylinder began to open before Fujiko's eyes. White smoke flowed from within. It seemed to have been cooled inside.

When the cylinder fully opened and Fujiko could see inside, she spoke without thinking.

"This is…!"

A giant black beast was curled up within.

—A dragon!

Its black body was covered in scales of black steel. Its horn was a giant screw made of steel. It had a silver glowing saddle on its back. This was the legendary dragon the demon king was said to have ridden into battle.

It was curled up with its tail pressed against its head, but it stirred and began moving. It slipped out of the cylinder with speed unbefitting of its size. It was about 15 meters long. It spread its folded wings as if stretching. It seemed to hold command over a space larger than its physical size.

"So it has been 100 years since I fell asleep."

ドン

He spoke. His face looked like a dinosaur or lizard, but his voice held great intelligence. His gold eyes opened and stared at Fujiko.

"But I recall being awakened just once. It was an imperfect activation, however. I think it has been 10 years since then. However, I take no joy in being woken for no purpose."

The dragon was only speaking to himself, but it was more than enough to frighten Fujiko.

"Y-you are…the legendary…"

"Are they speaking of me in legends? Try not to make me feel old. I was created to serve mankind and approach all of them impartially, but I was given a personality. And I prioritize acting in accordance with my personality over following my duties."

The dragon's voice rumbled deeply.

"E-excuse me, but wh-what do you mean by that?" asked Fujiko in a trembling voice.

"That I am selfish."

The dragon stuck his head out toward Fujiko as if threatening her. Fujiko screamed and fell backwards. The dragon let out a laugh.

"It pains me to be feared like that. And there is no need to be afraid any longer. I assume you are the one who activated me and you are unqualified. The unqualified are unable to make full use of me. And if my power is used recklessly, I will cause harm to mankind," said the dragon.

"Wh-what do you mean now?" said Fujiko in a trembling voice.

"When an unqualified person activates me, I must respond by swiftly killing that person," replied the dragon calmly.

And then the dragon opened its mouth wide in Fujiko's direction.

Part 3

"President!" cried Akuto.

They had all heard what the dragon had said.

The student council president replied in a bitter voice.

"Do not make me repeat myself."

The atmosphere grew as heavy as lead. No one said a word until Keena spoke up.

"A-chan! You need to save senpai!"

"I know that…but…"

Akuto was frustrated at the fact that he could not run forward. It was not that he was being held back by fear, laziness, or malice. It was because he understood that abandoning her was the right decision from the government's standpoint.

—The world can't be shown that the demon kings' power is still this strong!

A part of him felt the same way. Also, he had come to the academy to work with the government. For that reason, he could only say the president's decision was the right one.

"I have no choice but to go along with the right decision!" roared Akuto.

Keena then raised her voice to drown out his voice.

"A-chan, you idiot! You don't know how senpai felt about all this!"

As soon as Keena shouted that, Akuto felt an odd numbness spread through his body. He did not know what it was, but everyone except Keena had an odd look on their face. It seemed they were all feeling the same sensation.

—Eh?

He felt something suddenly flow into the back of his mind. It felt like dreaming while awake or having someone else's memories enter his mind.

He was running.

He was being pursued.

He was filled with intense impatience and fear.

This was someone's nightmare…no, their actual experience.

He hid a key at that hot spring shrine. He jotted down something on the toy plate and took a photograph of the cave entrance. He had promised to

take a photograph with the plate and show it to his little sister. He had never imagined he would use it this way.

He altered the landscape of the forest to throw off his pursuers. This was high-level magic he had been granted by Muleet, the god of the nation's land. He had received the divine protection of Muleet more than anyone. It would be impossible to completely lose his pursuers, but it would buy him time.

He then entered the ruins of the knight equipment laboratory. He hid the plate on a shelf in the back. His reason for this was simple: he was being pursued by the knights. He hoped this would reveal their crimes.

He continued to run. This would reveal their crimes. When he reflected on that fact, he realized where he would hide the last key. He ran.

He had to let someone know about that man at all costs. He had to reveal the truth about the man who had lied to him.

The seal to the demon king's final fortress had been broken and he had been sent to survey the area despite being a student. That was when that man had spoken to him.

"Could you investigate how to break the seal on that dragon? You only need to investigate it. Just between the two of us, it seems the next demon king has awoken. The government plans to reseal it after the survey is complete, but I would prefer to completely destroy it."

Who would have thought that had been a lie!

He had known that he was the only one who could break the password on the most difficult of the demon king's relics. If he only had to break the password and not the seal itself, he could manage. He had done some background research on that man. The man was not a black magician. He was one of the leaders of the Public Safety Committee. It was only natural to trust him.

But he eventually realized that the man was actually hatching a frightening plan.

He could hardly believe what that plan entailed.

He entered the crypt. After learning of that plan, he had done more research on the man. He had discovered something unbelievable: that

man was thought to have died in the war. That was 90 years ago. Who was this man?

He opened the box and searched for ashes. Naturally, none were found.

Yamato Bouichirou.

He would use the grave with that name to hide the toy keychain with the recording of the password.

It saddened him that he was forced to overwrite the recording of Fujiko's voice. Now he would not be able to hear her voice just before he died.

But it was best to leave behind the method of removing the dragon's seal for the next person to come along.

He listened to Fujiko's voice one last time, etched it into the back of his mind, overwrote it with the password, and placed it in the box.

He then created the map.

<To the brave one who has found this map…>

If possible, he wanted a black magician to find the map. He could no longer trust anyone but them. That was an odd thing. He had held such a prejudice against them before, yet now it was the government he could not trust.

The only place in the academy he could think that a black magician would go was the Mental Training Room. He had thoroughly investigated them out of his prejudice, so he was the only non-black magician who knew they used that place to communicate.

He attached the map to the wall.

He then left a hint as to what crimes he was trying to bring to light. He hid the map over the portion of the constitution that approved the establishment of the Imperial Public Safety Committee.

He doubted anyone else talented enough to break the dragon's seal would appear for several decades. No one in the government could break the seal other than by following the hints he had left behind. And if all went well, the password would fall into the hands of the black magicians who worked in secret. Even if that did not happen, the map would cause enough of a commotion that it would be seen by the government's main

faction and normal people before his enemies. If that happened, it would be impossible for them to monopolize the dragon.

And with that complete, one task remained.

He had to erase his memories of the password itself and of hiding the map. He would soon be captured. Once he was, he would be killed and necromancy would be cast on him. He had to erase the records of his memories from his god Muleet while he was still alive.

He used his authority as an associate priest to summon his god. He erased the appropriate records of his memories. He was forced to erase most of his school life. This would likely be hard on his family after his death.

His job was now done.

That man stood before him. The man was unpleasantly beautiful. He gave a cheerful and refreshing impression, but he was different on the inside…or perhaps he was not. It may have been that cheerful and refreshing side that had led him to work so hard toward his objective.

"Really? You erased your memories!? That keeps us from acquiring that dragon! Well done! This will delay our work by quite a bit. But this just means I need to think of another method."

The man shrugged. It served him right.

But he could not stand up to that man.

He would soon be killed.

The man stretched out his hand.

There was pain.

And shortly thereafter, only darkness.

"What was that!?" said Akuto.

Everyone else had the same expression as him.

Korone calmly explained, "These were memories recorded by the dragon. That dragon is illegally logging and saving the memories of every imperial citizen."

"So is it the god of the black magicians!?" asked Akuto in shock.

"It seems that function alone has continued even as it slept. No one was able to use it in that time, but after one hundred years, it is usable once more."

Despite Korone's explanation, there was one thing Akuto still did not understand.

"Why were those memories sent to all of us?"

"I believe someone acted as an intermediary. I do not know who, though."

Akuto looked over at Keena. She only gave a blank look in return. It seemed she did not know either.

—It doesn't matter who it was. We have seen it now. That is all that matters.

Akuto smiled in Keena's direction.

When she noticed, she smiled back.

"Okay!"

The student council president easily picked up on that atmosphere.

"This means nothing. I will not hold back," she said before making shooing motions toward Hiroshi and Keena.

"Korone," instructed Akuto.

Korone put on those roller skates she seemed to have taken a liking to, dashed over, grabbed Hiroshi and Keena under each of her arms, and moved away.

"Hattori-san," called out Akuto.

Junko shook her head and said, "A Suhara follower does not retreat."

"You can't do this. There is no reason for you to force yourself. This is my responsibility for sticking my head where it didn't belong."

"No, I need to pay Teruya Eiko back for what she did. I also think you made the right decision. And…and…" Junko trailed off, blushed, and continued quietly. "And you chose me, so I will-…"

"Eh? What was that?" Akuto asked because he could not hear her.

"You idiot! What I mean is-…" shouted Junko.

However, Akuto was once more unable to hear what she said. Before she could finish, Akuto's entire body was knocked back by an impact.

—Wha-!?

He was slammed against the ground before he even knew what was happening.

The same happened to Junko. And she seemed to have taken more damage than him. She groaned and was unable to get up.

"What did-…?"

He looked up and tried to say "what did you do?", but another impact struck him from the side.

However, Akuto managed to see what had hit him this time.

The student council president's arm had grown. She may have momentarily created more of the tissue forming her arm or it may have been a strike created solely out of mana like Junko's copies. Either way, the president had punched Akuto from the side while standing still ten meters away.

"The gong rings the instant you decide to fight," declared the president. And then she made a disinterested addition. "I saw those memories the same as you did. I understand how you feel. But I cannot allow you to pass for the sake of what I believe in."

"Then…" Akuto stood up. "Enough surprise attacks. Let's have an enjoyable fight."

"It seems you like fighting even more than your appearance lets on. Then let us have an enjoyable fight. It's been awhile since we met, but I have yet to introduce myself, have I? My name is Lily Shiraishi. I have a bit of a short temper."

Lily stretched out her right arm once more. Akuto twisted his body in an attempt to dodge it. And then a strike came from the opposite direction. Akuto was hit directly on the jaw. Lily had stretched her left arm out from below.

"At least expect a feint. You must not be as used to fighting as you let on."

Akuto shook his head to clear his muddled mind.

"Your judgment was wrong, president. I hate fighting."

"Come to think of it, these three mentioned that. They said you hesitated a lot despite your ridiculous strength."

Lily used her chin to point at the three.

"Is that so? Well, they were quite kind. They avoided making any fatal injuries. That is, except for the last one."

"When she transforms, she grows truly wild. Now, enough chatting. I am known to be quite kind as well. I would like to knock you out as quickly as possible."

As Lily said that, she pointed behind her.

The dragon fired something from his open maw. The legends said dragons breathed fire, but this dragon released a metal rod carved into a screw.

This meter-long metal rod stabbed into the ground with a great roar. The stone pavement was torn apart between Fujiko's legs where she still lay collapsed. It then rotated as it dug down into the ground.

"I created that within myself, so it is a portion of my body. Projectiles are cowardly, so one should wear down one's own body. That is how the previous demon king thought. Now, girl. Stand and face me. I provide even the unqualified with a chance to fight. The previous demon king told me to prioritize my feelings over my duties and so I shall," said the dragon.

Fujiko stood on trembling legs.

However, those memories she had seen were still lurking in the back of her mind.

—Brother…

She had learned the truth. The feelings she had held for ten years had all been based on lies. This made her feel that everything about her was meaningless.

"So you have stood. But you can do nothing with such shaky footing," declared the dragon coldly.

"There you have it." Lily shrugged at the dragon's words. "It would be best if you were unconscious. You don't want to see a drill tearing into a girl's body, do you? Once it kills Etou-kun, the dragon will go back to sleep. If we then destroy the recorded password, everything will be over. It will all come to an end while you sleep."

"I'm standing up to you because I can't accept that."

Akuto stared directly at Lily.

"Then what will you do? Overcome me and fight that dragon?" she said mockingly. "Doing that would be the same as choosing to be a demon king."

She was right about that, so Akuto was at a loss for words.

"I-I just need to do it in a way that doesn't make me a demon king."

Lily burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha! Excellent! I certainly can't let someone pass if they aren't even prepared to do what must be done!"

—I-it may be true that I am not prepared….

Akuto realized that his feelings were wavering. He had a bad habit of trying to look good, so he had a feeling he had come this far on nothing but momentum.

However…

"Do not worry! Do not worry about that, Sai Akuto!"

He heard a voice.

Junko had stood up.

Akuto looked up.

Junko raised her voice as she spoke to both Lily and Akuto.

"You may not be prepared, but I am! If you become a demon king, I will kill you!"

Those words brought clarity to Akuto's mind. He stood up as well.

"Honestly… If you say that, I have no choice but to get up." Akuto looked over at Junko. "I know how problematic my personality can be."

Junko blushed as he looked at her.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"I want everything to go well both in the present and the future. It makes me indecisive and I lack resolve. But if you will kill me, then maybe I can accept what might happen."

Akuto smiled.

Junko looked away and said, "Y-you are pathetic."

"There you have it, president."

Akuto turned back toward Lily. Her expression was one of admiration.

"You're quite the lady-killer. You would make a great ruler."

"Eh? I've never thought about it that way."

"I see. So you don't even realize it."

With that comment, Lily's arms grew once more. However, they stretched toward Junko instead of Akuto.

"Kh!"

Junko somehow managed to stop the punch with her sword, but the punches continued on and on. She was ultimately unable to withstand it all and was blown away.

"Hattori-san!" shouted Akuto.

Junko groaned after being knocked to the ground again.

"Uuh… I'm fine, so..."

"Understood."

He understood Junko's resolve painfully well, so he turned to face Lily.

"Here I come."

Akuto recalled the amplified tornado he had used in the crypt. If he could remember that wind spell, he could reproduce it without the bullet. He recalled the spell pulse that bullet had caused. He moved his fingers such that it drew out the same signals in his brain and used language to follow through with those signals.

"Transform this stirring in my heart to wind!"

A whirlwind appeared in Akuto's hand and instantly expanded into a tornado that approached Lily. This roaring tornado was several dozen meters tall, but Lily received it with an unconcerned expression.

"This is nothing but mana wind. The flow of mana can be stopped with more mana. That is a lesson you need to learn."

Lily created wind in her hand as well. This wind also instantly grew into a tornado. When it collided with Akuto's tornado, the two winds disappeared as if they had never existed.

"Remote mana attacks are easily eliminated by controlling mana. The way you once broke your enemies' arms and legs with mana pressure would be impossible without a great difference in power. One's power weakens considerably at a distance," explained Lily.

"Thanks for the lesson. I'll take that to mean a direct fistfight is the best plan. That brings it down to a simple matter of how much internal mana we have. With your small body, you should be at a disadvantage," said Akuto.

He had meant it as a casual comment, but the three officers watching on all stiffened as if they had been struck.

—?

Lily began acting oddly. She lowered her head and began trembling while her hand slowly crawled along the brim of her stylish hat.

The three officers all began panicking.

"Not good, gya!"

"Nothing good comes of the president touching her hat!"

"Gaahh!"

Lily's entire body was trembling.

"My small body?"

When Lily raised her head once more, her expression was overflowing with anger. She grabbed the brim of her hat and pulled it to the side to reverse the hat's direction.

"Ahh! She finally reversed her hat!"

"She can't be stopped once she does that, gya!"

The three officers all clung to each other and trembled in fear.

"Diiiieee!" roared Lily.

Both of her arms disappeared from her body.

—Ah!

Akuto was shocked. No, he did not even have time to be shocked. Fists rained down on his body from every direction.

"Waaah!"

While being pummeled from every direction, Akuto saw that every direction around him for several dozen meters was filled with fists.

The torrent of blows tossed Akuto's body into the air and refused to let him fall. The fists dancing around in the air looked like a sphere several dozen meters across. And Akuto was at the center floating around like a feather in the wind.

After seeing that Akuto was no longer moving, Lily finally brought an end to the fists. The look in her eyes had finally returned to normal.

"So you are finally unconscious."

After seeing Akuto fall to the ground, Lily returned her hat to normal and checked behind her.

Fujiko seemed to be somehow avoiding the dragon's attacks. However, she specialized in making medicines, so she could not handle close quarters combat. She had been backed up against a corner.

"Poor thing. But I will make sure to take revenge for you," muttered Lily too quietly for Fujiko to hear.

But then…

"This isn't over yet," rang out Akuto's voice.

Lily turned around in shock.

Akuto was covered in bruises, but he stood up. He moved forward on unsteady legs.

"You want more!?"

Lily sent out intense punches with both arms. She had not lost her cool this time, but she still sent blows accurately at Akuto's vitals with the same force as before.

However, Akuto did not stop walking forward.

"Ha ha. You really are kind, president. You went out of your way to teach me how to fight. I get it now. If you know it's coming, it doesn't hurt! That's the trick," muttered Akuto.

"Ah ha ha… So you've caught on!"

Lily laughed out of bravado but was actually half filled with fear. The student council president was known as the strongest in the school. Her fists had once destroyed an entire group of knights that had called her short. Yet Akuto continued forward despite receiving those fists.

"You three!" shouted Lily to the three officers.

"Right!"

The three officers straightened up and immediately prepared for battle. One hardened her clothes into a silver color, one put on armor, and one transformed into a beast.

"Don't hold back! Get him!"

The three officers displayed a perfectly coordinated formation. They attacked Akuto from three different directions simultaneously. A silver blade came from above, a beast's fangs came from the right, and an axe as tall as he was came from the left. Each of these attacks had troubled him before and now he had no way of avoiding them.

However…

Akuto did not stop moving forward.

He caught the silver blade with his teeth, he grabbed the beast's claws with his right hand, and he grabbed the axe with his left hand despite the blade digging into his fingers. And he continued forward while dragging the three officers along with him.

Lily continued the rain of blows, but Akuto did not stop.

Finally, Akuto arrived right in front of Lily. He shook his body to throw off the three officers with surprising strength. They flew about ten meters through the air.

"Waaah!"

"Gnyaaah!"

"Ohhh!"

The three of them let out different screams as they crashed into the floor. They slid across the floor while producing a tremendous racket.

Lily stopped her fists. While sweat poured from her brow, she looked up at Akuto.

"This is no joke. Why do you need to go this far?"

"I just have a feeling. I thought up a way of resolving all of this nicely, so I want to try it out. I haven't given much thought to the repercussions, but I just have a feeling it will work."

Akuto looked down at Lily with his battered face.

Lily shrugged.

"Are you stupid? If you're willing to put in this much effort for a reason like that, I don't even care anymore. I was going to show you my best attack, but never mind. You'll either be killed by the dragon or Hattori, but this will kill you either way."

When Akuto realized what she meant, he gasped.

"Then…"

"Shut up. I didn't lose. I just can't be bothered to continue fighting."

Lily pointed behind her.

"Thank you," said Akuto with a bow.

"You should be thanking Hattori. This is based on my trust in what she says. I am still convinced what you are doing here is wrong."

Lily used her chin to point toward Junko. Akuto turned around to find Junko finally standing back up. She held her bruised cheek in embarrassment and waved her hand to urge Akuto on.

"I will bring this all to a happy ending. Do you really think I'm wrong?" Akuto asked Lily.

Lily lifted one corner of her mouth and replied, "It's because you're wrong that we call you a demon king."

Akuto tried to pass by Lily, but she called out to him as if she had suddenly remembered something.

"Wait a second."

"?"

Akuto stopped and Lily instructed him to crouch down.

He did not understand but did so regardless. Lily stretched up.

"I forgot to give you your promised reward."

Lily then kissed Akuto on the cheek.

Part 4

Fujiko trembled in fear as a metal rod crashed into the wall like a stake next to her face.

She no longer had any means of resisting. She had used up all of the medicines she had on her. Not to mention that she was not sure those medicines worked on dragons.

Even while driven up against that wall, Fujiko continued to think about her brother.

For quite a long time, she had viewed her brother as dishonest. However, it turned out her brother had been honest and strong. Her childhood image of him had been accurate. But it was too late to regret it. Even so, she could not help but feel frustrated that she had taken such an odd direction for her life. She had always wanted to love her brother and she regretted suppressing those feelings. The effort she had put into creating her outward face had been for nothing and the cowardly means she had used to create her secret face had been nothing but a meaningless bluff put on by someone without the talent of her brother.

—But I will be set free from all of this when I die. According to the common religious beliefs, I suppose I will be going to join my brother.

Fujiko seemed to lose her mind with that thought and a smile appeared on her lips.

And as she smiled, the dragon opened his maw wide. A metallic smell flowed out from deep within his throat. Fujiko felt sick to the stomach.

And then…

"It's okay now, senpai. I will handle this."

She heard Akuto's voice.

Fujiko turned toward it.

His tall form had passed the gate. He stood directly behind the dragon. Despite clearly being so battered he could barely stand, he was puffing his chest out proudly.

The dragon turned his head to look as well.

"Most humans who act so tough are actually very shallow. Having the unqualified act as if they are qualified only irritates me."

As the dragon spoke coolly, he opened his mouth toward Akuto and fired a metal rod carved with a spiral at tremendous speed.

It was about a meter long and it caused a tremendous roar as it rotated.

However, Akuto did not evade it.

"Ryaaah!" he shouted as he mustered up every last bit of strength.

He swung his right fist toward the rotating metal rod.

As it rotated and flew through the air, the metal rod crashed into his fist.

The painful sound of metal scraping against metal reverberated throughout the area.

"What!?" cried the dragon in surprise.

Akuto's fist stopped the metal rod in midair. It did not stop rotating, but its tip did not drill a hole in Akuto's fist. Sparks flew from the fist and the rotating tip of the metal rod and the metal rod finally let out a great noise as it rotated. With a dry sound, the metal rod fell to the ground.

"I don't really know how to fight, so this is the only method I know."

Akuto shook his right hand as if it hurt.

The dragon spoke up in an interested voice.

"I do not know if you are qualified or not, but it has been 100 years since I met someone like you!"

"That's just because you've been sleeping for the last 100 years. You're overselling this."

Without waiting for Akuto to finish speaking, the dragon swung his tail to the side. His tail was as thick as a log, but Akuto stopped it with his fist.

Sparks flew from between the dragon's scales and Akuto's fist. The dragon pushed his tail down to knock Akuto the ground.

Nevertheless, Akuto held his ground and pushed back the dragon's tail. While covered in sweat and breathing heavily, he swung his hand once more.

"What are you doing?" asked the dragon in puzzlement.

"Thinking about how to end this so I don't have to kill you and you don't kill me or senpai. I think an old-fashioned brawl would be best. Even if we are different sizes."

Akuto seemed to be completely serious, so the dragon let out a laugh.

"Ha ha ha ha! No one has ever said that to me before! Fine. Let us have a wonderful brawl!"

The dragon and Akuto stood facing each other and sent metal rod against fist and tail against fist. They both managed to count up to 20 blows, but they were too tired to continue counting beyond that.

And…

The dragon may have decided this would be the final blow because he swung his head toward Akuto. As that head approached with a roar, Akuto sent out his fist.

The sound of metal clashing and then breaking rang out.

Once that noise died out, the human and dragon slowly collapsed to the ground simultaneously.

As Fujiko watched this unfold before her, she could not comprehend what had happened. Even so, she knew what she had to do.

Fujiko ran over to Akuto.

"What is your name?" asked the dragon from where it lay next to Akuto.

As he lay face-down on the ground, Akuto was sick of it all but felt he had to answer.

"Sai Akuto."

"What a horrible name."

"They gave it to me at the orphanage. Leave me alone. What about you?"

"Peterhausen."

"What a horrible name."

"My dead master gave it to me. He had a terrible naming sense, but I quite like it."

"Sounds like you had a good relationship with your master."

"He was an excellent man. And I hope that relationship can continue."

"Isn't he dead?"

"With my new master."

"Oh, that's nice. Congratulations."

"You are a fool, Sai Akuto. I mean you."

—What?

Akuto instinctually sat up.

"What do you mean?"

"Once I awaken, I require a master. Otherwise I will kill everyone who awakens me."

"But don't I need to be qualified?"

"Defeating me is part of that."

"No, wait a second! I refuse! I don't want this!"

"Are you sure? If you refuse, I must return to killing the people around me."

"No, wait! So what responsibilities do I have to take on if I become your master?"

"Nothing. However, my master is generally referred to as the demon king."

—Oh, no… I didn't think about the consequences again…

Akuto held his head in his hands.

And suddenly Fujiko ran over and embraced him.

"Wah! What are you doing, senpai?"

"Please stop calling me that!"

Fujiko looked at him with teary eyes.

—This is not good. Did her personality change due to the shock of what she saw?

"No, senpai. Calm down…"

"I told you to stop calling me that! Oh, my demon king! I will serve you for the rest of my life as a black magician!"

Fujiko pushed Akuto down to the ground.

"W-wait!"

—This is going to make my dream even harder to achieve… I wanted to be a top class national…what was it again?

Chapter 5: The Cheerful Conspirator

"I'm not sure what to think of this," complained Akuto.

Peterhausen insisted Akuto should live here if he was the dragon's master.

He was sitting within a room of the underground palace. The room was made to look exactly like a king's audience chamber from a picture book. It was covered in red carpet and contained an incredibly tall chair. Akuto was sitting in that chair, but it seemed to make his butt itch.

"Also, from an outsider's perspective…"

"From an outsider's perspective?" asked Peterhausen in puzzlement.

"From an outsider's perspective, I think I would look like a complete villain," continued Akuto.

The tall chair was decorated with skulls. Akuto sat in it with his legs crossed. Someone was sitting on the armrest facing outwards while nestling up against Akuto. It was Fujiko who had sworn allegiance to Akuto after truly awakening as a black magician. Keena was sitting on Akuto's lap and enjoying herself. Junko was standing next to the chair with a displeased look and her hand on her sword. The scene was rounded out by Peterhausen the 15 meter dragon curled up behind the chair and Hiroshi and Korone waiting at the bottom of the stairs leading to the chair.

"Looking like that, I can only assume you're trying to conquer the world. Maybe I should snap a photo and put it in the school newspaper," said Lily half in shock and half teasingly from where she was watching a bit away.

The three officers agreed with her suggestion.

"Please give me a break! I'm going to return to my dorm room! I want to have a normal school life!" cried Akuto.

"You really don't know when to give up, do you?" said Lily with a shrug.

In one area of the imperial capital was a certain building. A man was within an office there. He was breathtakingly beautiful, but had an odd lack of disagreeableness. Instead, he gave off a refreshing impression that led anyone to believe they could speak openly with him.

The man, Yamato Bouichirou, looked out upon the Japanese-style garden outside the window. He seemed to be contemplating something and it also appeared he had such a deep understanding of that garden that he could view it for hours on end without growing tired of it.

And then a figure rudely set foot in the garden. Bouichirou's expression clouded over, but the girl who had so roughly entered the garden showed no sign of noticing. She opened the window, climbed into the room, and simply poured her feelings onto Bouichirou.

"Hey! You need to torment Sai Akuto and Hattori Junko!" shouted Eiko as she threw herself into Bouichirou's arms while he remained seated.

"Tormenting someone is not a gentle way of doing things."

"But they're completely insane! They need to die!"

"That's right. But Sai Akuto did not die in the end…" said Bouichirou as if recalling that fact.

"Yeah, that was odd. What was with that?"

"Predictions of the future are nothing more than predictions. When the issue grows too complex, those predictions can be wrong. However, this one was still a bit odd. After all, Sai Akuto should have died when he released the seal."

Bouichirou brought a hand to his chin thoughtfully and Eiko vigorously agreed.

"That's right! That's what you said!"

"By the way, it seems someone else released the seal and Sai Akuto saved her. The secret to what changed the prediction may lie there."

"What do you mean?"

Eiko climbed up onto Bouichirou's lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. Bouichirou stroked her head as he replied.

"He has grown in an unexpectedly short period of time. Also, mana control is strongly linked to one's mental state. Something must have made him take everything more seriously."

"Amazing! You really do know everything, don't you!?" exclaimed Eiko like an excited child.

Bouichirou smiled bashfully.

"I have not lived for so long for nothing. Now, don't you need to provide your family with a report on your job?"

With that comment, Bouichirou lightly smacked Eiko on the ass. She wriggled her body teasingly and then ran out of the office.

With Eiko gone, Bouichirou let out a long sigh. He grabbed a pendant from around his neck and toyed with it in his hand. The pendant was made into a locket. When he opened it, a holographic photograph of a beautiful blonde woman floated up.

He wiped off his lap as if Eiko had dirtied it by sitting there, adjusted his position in the chair, and gazed at the photograph.

"It has been so long… I am growing weary. It is about time I finally settled things once and for all with that demon king," muttered Bouichirou to no one in particular.

Afterword

First of all, this is Mizuki Shoutarou. How are you doing? I'm doing well enough.

Anyway, this is Volume 2. And here is the second afterword. I should start by mentioning the afterword from last time. I did not receive a giant pile of information on horrible food around the country (not that I really expected to), so I am glad to see the Japanese people have a proper sense of taste. However, this means I cannot continue on the same topic. It makes sense since bad restaurants will normally go out of business.

At any rate, there is no chance my twisted personality will change anytime soon, so I will be discussing something similar. What has been interesting me lately is the term 善行. I am not talking about Zengyou, the area in Kanto. I mean Zenkou, the term meaning "good deeds". This might be sudden, but I recently realized that people always brag about the bad things they have done in the past but never brag about the good things they have done. If bragging about that became popular among the thugs hanging around the cities, Japan would become a better place. Now, let's simulate what a conversation like that would sound like.

"I may not look it now, but I used to be really good person."

"Really, senpai? You don't look it at all."

"See what I mean? But I was a well-known volunteer back in my hometown."

"Seriously? That's amazing!"

"When I was younger, I was satisfied just giving money to charity, but I was pissed when I learned those things don't get the money to the people who really need it."

"Yeah, some charities just use the money to run their organization. They're pathetic.'

"You know a lot about charities. Did you used to give money?"

"No, I'm nothing like you, senpai. I was nothing. You know how you can donate money to sponsor a foreign orphan? I'm sure someone like you has

heard of it, but that's what I did. I could only pay ten thousand yen or so, so I really was nothing…"

"Would you look at that? You've really got a good side to you."

"C'mon, I'm nothing compared to you, senpai."

I'm sure you can tell this would never catch on. You just can't brag about good deeds. Good deeds are difficult and boring. I'm not sure there's anything harder to brag about than good deeds. Even if you send your good deeds to the editorial department, they will not be mentioned in a future afterword.

Okay, about the actual novel.

This was another novel that really doesn't need much explanation or commentary. Just have fun reading it. I put a lot of energy into writing it, so I hope you all put a lot of energy into reading it. While you're reading it, try yelling out as loud as you can in the middle of the night when no one else is around. At any rate, it looks like I will actually get to put out more and more of these novels, so keep reading more and more of them. I will continue to do my very best.

On to the thanks.

First, my illustrator, Itou Souichi-san. I think Itou-san is aiming to be world-class. When I saw the roughs for this volume, I was utterly shocked. Personally, I think the student council president is perfect. This is the first time I've seen a character that I would not want as a friend, lover, or acquaintance but still think is great. This was unexpected even for me, the one who designed her personality.

Next, my editor, Ohashi-san. Once more, thank you for all your effort. I hope I can finish the next one with more time to spare. When people ask me if I intend to say that over and over again, I will answer no. Oddly enough, though, the work always takes so much time to complete. I will continue working while praying I will get faster at it.

And lastly, I give my thanks to everyone else involved.

Now then, it looks like we can enjoy this together even more from now on!

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Credits

Story : Mizuki Shoutarou
Illustrator : Itou Souichi
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